THE MOTOR GIRLS ON WATERS BLUE

MARGARET PENROSE

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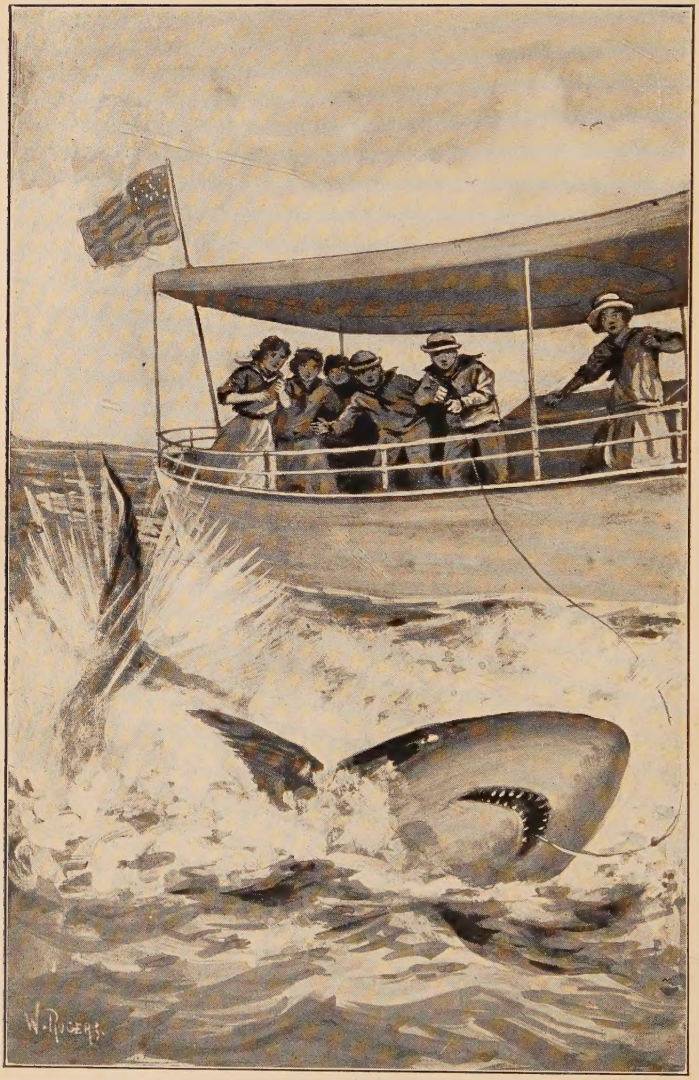

BY WILD LEAPS AND BOUNDS, SOUGHT TO FREE HIMSELF FROM THE SHARP HOOK

Motor Girls on Waters Blue. *Page* 152

THE MOTOR GIRLS ON WATERS BLUE

Or

The Strange Cruise of The Tartar

BY

MARGARET PENROSE

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTOR GIRLS," "THE MOTOR GIRLS ON CEDAR LAKE," "THE MOTOR GIRLS ON CRYSTAL BAY," "DOROTHY DALE," "DOROTHY DALE'S QUEER HOLIDAYS," "DOROTHY DALE IN THE CITY," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

BOOKS BY MARGARET PENROSE

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12mo. Cloth. Illustrated.

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THE MOTOR GIRLS ON WATERS BLUE

CHAPTER I

NEWS

With a crunching of the small stones in the gravel drive, the big car swung around to the side entrance of the house, and came to a stop, with a whining, screeching and generally protesting sound of the brake-bands. A girl, bronzed by the summer sun, let her gloved hands fall from the steering wheel, for she had driven fast, and was tired. The motor ceased its humming, and, with a click, the girl locked the ignition switch as she descended.

"Oh, what a run! What a glorious run, and on a most glorious day!" she breathed in a half whisper, as she paused for a moment on the bottom step, and gazed back over the valley, which the high-setting house commanded, in a magnificent view.

The leaves of the forest trees had been touched, gently as yet, by the withering fingers of coming winter, and the browns, reds, golden ambers, purples and flame colors ran riot under

the hazy light of an October sun, slowly sinking to rest.

"It was a shame to go alone on this simply perfect day," murmured the autoist, as she drew off one glove to tuck back under her motoring cap a rebellious lock of hair. "But I couldn't get a single one of the girls on the wire," she continued. "Oh, I just hate to go in, while there's a moment of daylight left!"

She stood on the porch, against a background of white pillars, facing the golden west, that, every moment, under the now rapidly appearing tints of the sunset, seemed like some magically growing painting.

"Well, I can't stand here admiring nature!" exclaimed Cora Kimball, with a sudden descent to the commonplace. "Mother will be wanting that worsted, and if we are to play bridge tonight, I must help Nancy get the rooms in some kind of shape."

As Cora entered the vestibule, she heard a voice from the hall inside saying:

"Oh, here she is now!"

"Bess Robinson!" murmured Cora. "And she said she couldn't come motoring with me. I wonder how she found time to run over?"

Cora flung open the door to confront her chum Bess, or, to be more correct, Elizabeth Robinson—the brown-haired, "plump" girl—she who

was known as the "big" Robinson twin—the said Bess being rather out of breath from her rapid exit from the parlor to the hall.

As might be surmised, it did not take much to put Bess out of breath, or, to be still more exact, to put the breath out of Bess. It was all due to her exceeding—plumpness—to use a "nice" word.

"Oh, Cora!" exclaimed Bess. "I've been waiting *so* long for you! I thought you'd *never* come! I—I——"

"There, my dear, don't excite yourself. Accidents will happen in the best of manicured families, and you simply *must* do something—take more exercise—eat less—did you every try rolling over and over on the floor after each meal? One roll for each course, you know," and Cora smiled tantalizingly as she removed her other glove, and proceeded to complete the restoration of her hair to something approaching the modern style—which task she had essayed while on the porch.

"Well, Cora Kimball, I like your——"

"No slang, Bess dear. Remember those girls we met this summer, and how we promised never, never to use it—at least as commonly as they did! We never realized how it sounded until we heard them."

"Oh, Cora, do stop. I've such a lot to tell

you!" and Bess laid a plump and rosy palm over the smiling lips of her hostess.

"So I gathered, Bess, from your manner. But you must not be in such a hurry. This is evidently going to be a mile run, and not a hundred-yard dash, as Jack would say. So come in, sit down, get comf'y, wait until you and your breath are on speaking terms, and I'll listen. But first I want to tell you all that happened to me. Why didn't you come for a spin? It was glorious! Perfectly magnificent!"

"Oh, Cora, I wanted so much to come, you know I did. But I was out when you 'phoned, and mamma is so upset, and the house is in such a state—really I was glad to run out, and come over here. We are going——"

"My turn first, Bess dear. You should have been with me. In the first place, I had a puncture, and you'll never in the world guess who helped me take off the shoe——"

"Your shoe, Cora!"

"No, silly! The tire shoe. But you'd never guess, so I'll tell you. It was Sid Wilcox!"

"That fellow who made so much trouble——"

"Yes, and who do you think was with him?"

"Oh, Ida Giles, of course. That's easy."

"No, it was Angelina Mott!"

"What, sentimental Angie?"

"The same. I can't imagine how in the world

she ever took up with Sid enough to go motoring."

"Say, rather, how he took up with her. Sid is much nicer than he used to be, and they say his new six-cylinder is a beautiful car."

"So it is, my dear, but I prefer to select my chauffeur—the car doesn't so much matter. Well, anyhow, Sid was very nice. He offered to put in a new inner tube for me, and of course I wasn't going to refuse. So Angelina and I sat in the shade, while poor Sid labored. And the shoe was gummed on, so he had no easy task. But I will say this for him—he didn't even once hint that there was a garage not far off. Wasn't that nice?"

"Brave and noble Sid!"

"Yes, wasn't he, Bess? But I don't want to exhaust all my eloquence and powers of description on a mere puncture."

"Oh, Cora! Did anything else happen?" and Bess, who had followed her chum into the library of the Kimball home, sank down, almost breathless once more, into the depths of a deep, easy chair.

"There you go again!" laughed Cora, laying aside her cap and veil. "I'll have to pull you out of that, Bess, when you want to get up. Why do you always select that particular chair, of all others?"

"It's so nice and soft, Cora. Besides, I can get up myself, thank you," and, with an assumption of dignity, that did not at all accord with her plump and merry countenance, and figure, Bess Robinson tried to arise.

But, as Cora had said, she needed help. The chair was of such a depth that one's centre of gravity was displaced, if you wish the scientific explanation.

"Now don't you dare lean back again!" warned Cora, as her chum sat on the springy edge of the chair, in a listening attitude. "To resume, as the lecturer in chemistry says, after Sid had so obligingly fixed the puncture, I started off again, for mamma wanted some worsted and I had offered to run into town to get it for her. The next thing that happened to me, Bess dear, I saw the nicest young man, and ran right into——"

"Not into him, Cora! *Don't* tell me you hurt anyone!" cried Bess, covering her face with her hands—or at least trying to, for her hands were hardly large enough for the completion of the task.

"No, I didn't run into him, Bess, though there was a dog—but that's another story."

"Oh, Cora! I do wish you'd finish one thing at a time. And that reminds me——"

"Wait, Bess, dear. I didn't run into the young

man, but he bowed to me, and I turned around to make sure who he was, for at first I thought him a perfect stranger, and I was going to cut him. In my excitement, I ran right into a newly oiled place on the road, and, before I knew it, I was skidding something awful!

"Before I could reach the emergency brake, I had run sideways right against the curbing, and it's a mercy I didn't split a rim. And the young man ran over——"

"Oh, Cora Kimball! I'll never get my news in, if I don't interrupt you right here and now!" cried Bess. "Listen, my dear! I simply must tell you. It's what I ran over for, and I know you can't have had any serious accident, and look as sweet as you do now—it's impossible!"

"Thanks!" murmured Cora, with a mock bow. "After that, I must yield the floor to you. Go on, Bess. What is it? Has some one stolen your car, or have you discovered a new kind of chocolate candy? I wish I had some now; I'm simply starved! You have no idea how bracing and appetizing the air is. What was I telling you about?"

"Never mind, Cora. It's my turn. You can't guess what has happened."

"And I'm not going to try, for I know you're just dying to tell me. Go on. I'm listening," and Cora sat on a stool at the feet of her chum.

"Well, it would take too long to tell it all, but what would you say, if I went on a long sea voyage this winter?"

"What would I say? Why, my dear, I'd say that it was simply perfectly magnificent! It sounds like—like a wedding tour, almost. A sea voyage. Oh, Bess, do tell me!" and Cora leaned forward eagerly, expectantly. "Are you really going?"

"It seems so, yes. Belle and I shall have to go if papa carries out his plans, and takes mamma to the West Indies. You see it's like this. He has——"

A knock came at the door. Cora turned her head quickly, and called: "Come in!"

A maid entered, bearing on a silver server a note, the manila envelope of which proclaimed it as a telegraph message.

"Oh, a telegram!" gasped Cora, and her fingers trembled in spite of her, as she opened it.

She gave a hasty glance at the written words, and then cried:

"Oh, it was for mother, but the envelope had 'Miss Kimball' on it. However, it doesn't matter, and I'm glad I opened it first. Oh, dear!"

"Bad news?" asked Bess, softly.

"It's about my brother Jack," said Cora, and there was a sob in her voice. "He has suffered a nervous breakdown, and will have to leave college at once!"

CHAPTER II

MORE NEWS

"Oh, Cora!" murmured Bess, rising from the chair, and it was with no easy effort that she did so, for she had allowed herself to sink back again into its luxurious depths. "Oh, Cora dear! Isn't that perfectly dreadful!"

Cora Kimball did not answer. She was staring at the fateful telegram, reading it over and over again; the words now meaningless to her. But she had grasped their import with the first swift glance. Jack was ill—in trouble.

Bess put her arms around her chum, and slipped one plump hand up on the tresses tangled by the wind on the motor ride.

"Can I do anything—to help—your mother—is she——"

"Of course!" exclaimed Cora with a sigh. "I must tell mother at once. Yes, she's at home, Bess. Will you—do you mind coming with me?"

"Of course not, my dear. I wouldn't think of letting you go alone to tell her. Is the telegram from Jack himself?"

"No, it's from Walter Pennington. Walter says a letter follows—special delivery."

"Oh, then you'll get it soon! Perhaps it isn't so bad as you think. Dear Walter is so good!"

"Isn't he?" agreed Cora, murmuringly. "I sha'n't worry so much about Jack, now that I know Wally is with him. Oh, but if he has to leave college——"

Cora did not finish. Together she and Bess left the library, seeking Mrs. Kimball, to impart to her the sudden and unwelcome news. And so, when there is a moment or two, during which nothing of chronicling interest is taking place, my dear readers may be glad of a little explanation regarding Cora Kimball and her chums, and also a word or two concerning the previous books of this series.

Cora Kimball was the real leader of the motor girls. She was, by nature, destined for such a position, and the fact that she, of all her chums, was the first to possess an automobile, added to her prestige. In the first volume of this series, entitled "The Motor Girls," I had the pleasure of telling how, amid many other adventures, Cora, and her chums, Bess and Belle Robinson, helped to solve the mystery of a twenty thousand dollar loss.

Cora, Bess and Belle were real girl chums, but they never knew all the delights of chumship until

they "went in" for motoring. Living in the New England town of Chelton, on the Chelton River, life had been rather hum-drum, until the advent of the "gasoline gigs," as Jack, Cora's brother, slangily dubbed them. Jack, with whose fortunes we shall concern ourselves at more length presently, had a car of his own—one strictly limited to two—a low-slung red and yellow racing car, "giddy and gaudy," Cora called it.

Later on, the Robinson twins also became possessed of an automobile, and then followed many delightful trips.

"The Motor Girls on a Tour," the second volume of the series, tells in detail of many surprising happenings, which were added to, and augmented, at "Lookout Beach."

Through New England the girls went, after their rather strenuous times at the seaside, and you may be sure Cora Kimball was in the forefront of all the happenings on that rather remarkable run.

Perhaps the most romantic of all the occurrences that befell the girls were the series at Cedar Lake. There, indeed, were Cora and her chums put to a supreme test, and that they emerged, tried and true, will not be surprising news to those of you who really know the motor maids.

As another summer followed the green spring,

so adventures followed our friends, and those on the coast were in no whit tamer than previous happenings. Once again did Cora prove that she could "do things," if such proof were needed.

"The Motor Girls on Crystal Bay; Or, The Secret of the Red Oar," is the title of the book immediately preceding this one.

It would hardly be fair to tell you, bold-facedly, what the "secret" was. I would not like a book spoiled for me that way, and I am sure you will agree with me.

But when Cora and her friends made the acquaintance of sad little Freda Lewis, and later on of Denny Shane, the picturesque old fisherman, they had the beginnings of the mysterious secret. And in solving it, they bested the land-sharpers, and came upon the real knowledge of the value of the red oar.

Those incidents had taken place during the summer. Autumn had come, with its shorter days, its longer nights, the chill of approaching frosts and winter, and the turning of leaves, and the girls had bidden farewell to the sad, salty sea waves, and had returned to cheerful Chelton.

Cheerful Chelton—I believe I never thus alliteratively referred to it before, but the sound falls well on my ear. Cheerful Chelton—indeed it was so, and though Cora and her chums had enjoyed themselves to the utmost at Crystal Bay—

and in so enjoying had done a noble service—still they were glad to get back.

And now——

I beg your pardon! I really am forgetting the boys, and as they always have, and seem always destined to play an important part in the lives of the girls, perhaps I had better introduce them in due form.

To begin with, though not to end with, there was Cora's brother Jack. Like all other girls' brothers was Jack—a tease at times, but of sterling worth in hours of distress and trouble.

Jack was a junior at Exmouth College, but, bless you! that is not nearly as important as it sounds, and none of my new readers need be on their dignity, or assume false society manners with Jack. For I warn them, if they do, the thin veneer will very soon be scratched off. A true boy was Jack!

So was his chum, Walter Pennington—"Wally," the girls often called him, though it was not at all an effeminate term of endearment. Walter gave exactly the opposite impression from that. Besides, he was too athletic (which you could tell the moment you looked at him) to further such associations.

Other young men there were, Ed Foster, in particular, who often went motoring with the girls, to make the third male member which

caused the little parties to "come out even."

Occasionally Paul Hastings, and his sister Hazel, would be included, but, of late, Paul had been too busy, setting up an automobile business of his own, to ride with his friends.

So much for the boys—though there were more of them, but we need not concern ourselves with them at present.

Bess and Belle Robinson were the daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Perry Robinson—the "rich" Mr. Robinson, as he was called, to distinguish him from another, and more humble, though none the less worthy, citizen of Chelton. Bess and Belle had nearly everything they wanted—which list was not a small one. But mostly they wanted Cora Kimball, and they looked up to her, deferred to her and loved her, with a devotion that comes only from sweet association since early childhood.

"Cheerful Chelton!" Somehow I cannot seem to forego the temptation of using that expression again. It was a typical New England village, the nearness of it to New York not having spoiled it.

Of late, the invasion of many automobiles had threatened to turn it into a "popular" resort. There was already one garage, and another in building, and to the trained and experienced motorist, no more need be said.

It was to Chelton that Cora Kimball and her

chums had returned, following their summer at Crystal Bay. Cora, after trying in vain to get some of her chums, by telephone, to come for a little motor run with her, had gone alone, coming back to find Bess at her home, when the events narrated in the initial chapter took place.

Now the two girls were on their way upstairs to impart the news contained in the telegram, to Mrs. Kimball.

"Do you—do you think she'll faint?" asked Bess.

"No—of course not! Mother isn't of the fainting sort," replied Cora, for Mrs. Kimball, a widow since her boy and girl were little children, was used to meeting emergencies bravely and calmly.

"I wonder what could have happened to Jack?" mused Bess, as they reached the upper hall. "Do you suppose he could have been hurt playing football, Cora?"

"I don't see how. The season hasn't really opened yet, and they play only light games at first. Besides, Jack has played before, and knows how to take care of himself. I can't imagine what it is—a nervous breakdown."

"Probably Wally's letter will tell."

"I hope so. Oh, but, Bess, I didn't hear your news. You must tell me all about it, my dear."

"I will—when this excitement is over."

Mrs. Kimball received the news calmly—that

is, calmly after a first sharp in-taking of breath, and a spasmodic motion toward her heart. For Jack was very dear to her.

"Well, my dears, we must hope for the best," she said, cheerfully, to the girls. "Fortunately, his room is in order, which is more than can be said for it when he went away. Cora, can you look up trains, or, better still, ask the station agent when one might get in from Exmouth. Probably Walter will bring Jack home as soon as he can.

"It can't be so very serious, or Walter would have so specified in his telegram. I am anxious to get his letter, however. You might call up the post-office, Cora, and find out when the next mail gets in. Then you could go down in your car and get the special. That will be quicker than waiting for the boy to come up on his bicycle with it. Often he has half a dozen letters to deliver, and he might be delayed coming to us."

"I'll do that, Mother. You seem to think of everything!" and Cora threw her arms about the neck of the gray-haired lady, in whose eyes there was a troubled look, though neither in voice nor manner did she betray it.

"I can't imagine Jack ill," murmured Bess.

"Nor I," said Cora. "He has always been so strong and healthful. If only it isn't some accident——"

"Don't suggest it!" begged Bess. "Shall I come with you to the station, Cora?"

"I'd like to have you, dear, if you can spare the time."

"As if I wouldn't make time for such a thing as this. Come, do your telephoning, and we'll go."

Cora learned that no train which Jack could possibly get would arrive until very late that afternoon, but at the post-office it was said a mail would be in within the hour, and there was a chance that the special delivery letter would be on it.

"We'll go and see," decided Cora, now again a girl of action.

"And on your way, Cora dear," requested her mother, "stop at Dr. Blake's office, and ask him to meet the train Jack comes on. While I anticipate nothing serious, it is best to be on the safe side, and Jack may be in a state of collapse after his trip. You had better explain to Dr. Blake, rather than telephone."

"Yes, mother. Now are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Oh, certainly. I am not alone, with the servants here. Besides, John is just outside, trimming the lawn paths. You won't be long."

"No longer than we can help. Come on, Bess. Oh! and now you'll have a chance to tell me what you started to."

"Oh, it isn't so much, Cora. In fact, I don't like to mention my pleasure, after hearing of your trouble."

"Then it's pleasure?"

"Yes, Belle seems to think so."

"Did you mention the West Indies?"

"Yes, father has to go to Porto Rico on business, and we are going to make a winter cruise of it. Mamma and we girls are going, and what I came over to ask you——"

The voice of Bess was rather lost in the throb of the motor as Cora thrust over the lever of the self-starter. As the two girls settled themselves in the seat, Bess resumed:

"I came over to ask if you couldn't go with us, Cora? Can't you come on a winter's cruise to where there is no snow or ice, and where the waters are blue—so blue?"

"Come with you?" gasped Cora.

"Yes. Papa and mamma specially asked me to come and invite you. Oh, Cora, do say you'll go! It will be such fun!"

"I'd love to, Bess," said Cora, after a moment's thought. "But there's poor Jack, you know. I shall probably have to stay home and nurse him. I can't leave mother all alone."

"Oh, Cora!" murmured Bess, in disappointed tones.

CHAPTER III

THE LACE SELLER

CORA, Bess and Belle were sitting on the broad, long porch of the Kimball home. It was the next day. To be exact, the day following the imparting of Cora's news to Bess, of her automobile mishaps, the day of the news which Bess retailed to her friend and chum, concerning the trip to the West Indies, and the still more news, if I may be permitted the expression, of Jack's sudden illness.

Cora and Bess had gone to the post-office to get the expected special delivery letter, stopping on their way to speak to Dr. Blake, who had agreed to meet any train on which the stricken Jack might be expected. But, as it happened, his services were not required that night, for Jack did not arrive.

To go back a little bit, from the point where we have left the three girls sitting on the porch, Cora and Bess did find the special delivery letter awaiting them in the post-office.

"And I'm glad you called for it," said Harry Moss, whose duty it was to deliver the blue-stamped epistles, "for I've got a lot of 'em this afternoon, and your place is out of my route, Miss Cora."

"All right, Harry," spoke Cora, half-hearing. She was already tearing open the envelope, as the messenger rode off on his wheel, certainly at a pace to justify the old proverb that he was a rolling stone, even if he had already gathered moss.

"Is it from Walter?" asked Bess.

"Yes, and it isn't as bad as we feared. Jack overtrained, trying for a new position on the football eleven, and that, with some extra studies he undertook, reduced his already tingling nerves to a condition where he was not at all himself."

"A long rest and a change will set him up again in fine style," Walter wrote. "There is no need worrying, Cora," for he had written to her, rather than to Mrs. Kimball, relying on Cora's discretion to explain matters.

"I am bringing Jack home, and we'll come on the early afternoon train, Thursday. There is no great need of haste."

It was now Thursday, just after lunch, and the girls were waiting at Cora's house to go down with her, or, rather one of them (to be decided later) to meet Jack and Walter. There was no

need of a physician to help Jack home, though Dr. Blake promised his services when the sufferer should have been safely quartered in his own room.

"Isn't it good of Wally to come home with him?" ventured Belle, thoughtfully gazing at her long, thin hands, that were still tanned by the summer's sun.

"Perfectly fine!" exclaimed Cora. "Oh, you can always depend on Wally," and her eyes lightened up.

"So you can, too, on Jack, for that matter," voiced Bess, warmly. Bess was, of late, generally regarded as having more than a mere chum's-sisterly feeling for Jack.

"I suppose he'll lose a term," remarked Belle. "Too bad, I say."

"Better that than lose your health," declared Cora, as she put back a strand of hair that would persist in straying out from under her cap, for she, as well as the others, were attired for motoring, the Robinson twins, in fact, having come over in their car.

"Oh, Cora! I think you look so different with your hair in that new close formation!" declared Bess. "I wish I could get mine to lie down flat at the sides, and over my ears. How do you do it?"

"Whisper—i—t's a secret," said Cora, smil-

ing. "I found a new kind of hairpin when I was shopping the other day."

"Oh, do show us!" begged Belle. "I was going to have the permanent wave put in mine, but it costs twenty-five dollars, and it's awfully tiring, Hazel said. Besides, I think it's getting rather—common."

"Do show us, Cora!" begged Bess.

"Come inside. I'm not going to turn the porch into a hair-dressing parlor for demonstrations," laughed Cora. "It won't take a minute to show you how to do it, and we have plenty of time before Jack's train is due."

Cora obligingly let down her pretty hair, and then, by means of the new hairpins, she put it up again, in the latest "flat" mode, which, with its rather severe lines, is far from becoming to the average face. But, as it happened, Cora's face was not the average, and the different style was distinctly becoming to her.

"Oh, isn't it simple—when you're shown?" cried Bess. "I wonder if I'd have time to do mine that way before——?"

"Before Wally sees you!" interrupted her sister. "No, and don't think it. He's probably seen plenty of that style at college, and——"

"Thank you! I wasn't thinking of Mr. Pennington!" and Bess tried to tilt her chin up in the air with an assumption of dignity that ill sat

upon her, the said chin being of the plump variety which lends itself but poorly to the said tilting.

"Cora, are you there?" asked the voice of Mrs. Kimball from the porch.

"Yes, Mother. I was just showing the girls the new hairpins. We are going to the station directly."

Cora's voice floated out of the low French windows, which opened from the library to the porch, and they were swung wide, for the fall tang in the air had vanished with the rising of the orb of day, and it was now warm and balmy.

"It will be even warmer than this when we go to the West Indies," murmured Bess. "Oh, Cora, I do wish you were going!"

"So do I, dear! But I don't see how I can."

"Hark!" said Belle, softly.

A murmur of voices came from the porch through the low, opened windows.

"It's one of those Armenian lace peddlers," said Cora, stooping down to look, as she finished making the twist at the back of her head. "There's been a perfect swarm of them around lately. Mother is talking to her, though she seldom cares for lace—such as they sell."

"There is some beautiful lace work to be had on some of the West Indian islands, so mamma

says," spoke Belle. "I am just crazy to get there!"

"Are you going to spend all your time on Porto Rico?" asked Cora, as she finished her hair.

"Well, most of it, though we shall probably cruise about some," spoke Bess, and as she paused the murmuring of the voices of Mrs. Kimball and the lace peddler could be heard.

"She doesn't talk like an Armenian," ventured Belle. "She has a Spanish accent."

"Yes, so she has," agreed Cora. "Oh, girls! You don't know how I envy you that trip. But—duty first, you know," and she sighed.

"We expect to have a perfectly gorgeous time," went on Belle, as she settled her trim jacket more snugly over her slim hips. "One trip papa has promised us is to Sea Horse Island, not far from Porto Rico. He is going there after orchids—you know he is an enthusiastic amateur collector—and he says some very rare ones grow on Sea Horse. I wish I could send you some, Cora."

"It's awfully sweet of you, but——"

The girls were interrupted by the darkening of one of the low windows, by a tall, slim shadow. In surprise they looked up to see staring at them a girl whose swarthy, olive-tinted face proclaimed her for a foreigner from some sunny clime.

"WE ARE GOING THERE—AMONG OTHER PLACES," PUT IN BESS.

In her hand she held a bundle of lace, which she had evidently taken from her valise to show to Mrs. Kimball. Cora's mother had arisen from a porch chair, in some wonder, to follow the girl's movements.

"Pardon Senoritas," began the lace seller, in soft accents, "but did I hear one of you ladies mention Sea Horse Island—in ze West Indies? I am not sure—I——"

She paused, painfully self-conscious.

"I spoke of it," said Belle, gently. "We are going there on a winter cruise, and——"

"Pardon me—but to Sea Horse Island?" and the girl's trembling voice seemed very eager.

"We are going there—among other places," put in Bess, and her voice grew rather colder than her sister's, for the manner of the lace seller was passing strange.

"Oh—to Sea Horse Island—in ze West Indies—Oh, if I could but go zere—my father—he is—he is, oh, Senoritas, I crave your pardon, but —but——"

Her voice trailed off in a whisper, and swaying, she fell at the feet of Cora, who sprang forward, but too late, to catch the slim, inanimate burden. The little lace peddler lay in a crumpled-up heap on the floor.

CHAPTER IV

JACK ARRIVES

"Oh, Cora!"

"The poor girl!"

Belle and Bess, with clasped hands, bent over the prostrate form of the girl, whose plain black dress showed the dust and travel stains of the highways about Chelton. From the verandah Mrs. Kimball stepped in, through the long window.

"Get some water, Cora," she directed in a calm and self-possessed voice. "Also the aromatic ammonia on my dressing table. It is merely a faint. Poor girl! She seemed very weak while she was talking to me. I was just going to ask her to sit down, and let me have a cup of tea brought to her, when she suddenly turned away from me and came in where you girls were."

"She heard us talking," ventured Bess, a little awed by the strange happening.

"And she asked the oddest question—about Sea Horse Island—where papa is going—and

she spoke of her father—I wonder what she meant?" asked Belle.

"Time enough to find out after we've revived her," suggested Cora, who, like her mother, was not at all alarmed by a mere fainting fit.

Belle, inspired by her chum's coolness, had stooped over and was raising the girl's head.

"Don't do that!" exclaimed Cora. "The trouble is all the blood has gone from her head now. Let it remain low and the circulation will become normal, after she has had a little stimulant. I'll get the ammonia," and she hurried off, stopping long enough to ring for her mother's maid.

The foreign girl opened her dark brown eyes under the reviving stimulus of the aromatic spirits of ammonia, and she tried to speak. She seemed anxious to apologize for the trouble she had caused by fainting.

"That's all right, my dear," said Mrs. Kimball, soothingly. "Don't bother your poor head about it. You may stay here until you feel better."

"But, senora——" she protested, faintly.

"Hush!" begged Cora, touching the girl's hand gently with her own brown fingers. It was a pretty little hand, that of the lace seller—a hand not at all roughened by heavy work. Indeed, if she had made some of the dainty lace she was exhibiting, a piece of which was even now

entangled about her, she needs must keep her hands unroughened.

"Oh, but Senorita, I—I am of ze ashamed to be so—to be——" Again her voice trailed off into that mere faintness, which was as weak as a whisper, yet unlike it.

"Now, not another word!" insisted Mrs. Kimball, in the tone of her daughter, and the Robinson twins well knew she meant to have her own good way. "You are in our hands, my dear child, and until you are able to leave them, you must do as we say. A little more of that ammonia, Cora, and then have Janet bring in some warm bouillon—not too hot. I believe the poor child is just weak from hunger," she whispered over the head of the lace seller, whose brown eyes were now veiled with the olive lids.

"Oh!" gasped Bess. "Hungry!"

"Hush! She'll hear you," cautioned Belle, for somehow she sensed the proudness of those who, though they toil hard for their daily bread, yet have even greater pride than those who might, if they wished, eat from golden dishes—the pride of the poor who are ashamed to have it known that they hunger—and there is no more pitiful pride.

The girl did not show signs of sensing anything of that which went on around her. Even when the second spoonful of ammonia had trickled

through her trembling lips, she did not again open her eyes.

"Here is the bouillon," said Janet, as she came in with some in a dainty cup, on a servette.

"We must try to get her to take a little," said Mrs. Kimball, who had her arm under the girl's neck. A dusky flush in the olive cheeks told of the returning blood, under the whip of the biting ammonia.

Some few sips of the hot broth the girl was able to take, but she did not show much life, and, after a close look at her immobile countenance, and feeling of the cold and listless hands, Cora's mother said:

"I think we had better put her to bed, and have Dr. Blake look at her when he comes for Jack."

"Oh, Jack! I had almost forgotten about him!" exclaimed Cora. "We must go to the depot. It is almost time for his train."

"You have time enough to help me," said her mother, gently. "I think we must look after her, Cora, at least——"

"Oh, of course, Mother. We can't send her to the hospital, especially when she seems so refined. She is really—clean!" and Cora said the word with a true delight in its meaning. She had seen so many itinerant hawkers of lace who were not—and neither were their wares.

"Oh, she has such a sweet, sweet face," murmured Belle, who was fair, and who had always longed to be dark.

"Is there a bed ready, Janet?" asked Mrs. Kimball.

"Yes, Madam, in the blue room." The Kimball family had a habit of distinguishing chambers by the color of the wall papers.

"That will do. We'll take her there. I think a little rest and food is all she needs. She looks as though she had walked far to-day."

A glance at the worn and dusty shoes confirmed this.

"Can we carry her, or shall I call John?" asked Cora, referring to the one man of all work, who kept the Kimball place in order.

"Oh, I think we can manage," said her mother. "She is not heavy."

It was not until Cora and her mother lifted the girl, that they realized what a frail burden she was in their arms.

"She's only a girl, yet she has the face of a woman, and with traces of a woman's troubles," whispered Belle, as Cora and Mrs. Kimball, preceded by Janet to hold aside the draperies, left the room.

"Yes. And I wonder what she meant by speaking of her father and Sea Horse Island in the way she did?" spoke Bess. "It sounds almost like a mystery!"

"Oh, you and your mysteries!" scoffed Belle. "You'd scent one, if an Italian organ grinder stopped in front of the house, looked up at your window, and played the *Miserere*."

"I might give him something to eat, anyhow," snapped Bess—that is, as nearly as Bess ever came to snapping, for she was so well "padded," both in manners and by nature, that she was too much like a mental sofa cushion to hurt even the feelings of any one.

Cora came down presently, announcing:

"She is better now. She took a little of the bouillon, but she is very weak. Mother insists on her staying in bed. She really seems a very decent sort of a person—the girl, I mean," added Cora quickly, with a little laugh. "She was so afraid of giving trouble."

"Did she tell anything of herself?" asked Bess.

"She tried to, but mother would not hear of it until she is stronger. I really think the poor thing was starving. She can't make much of a living selling lace, though some of it is very beautiful," and Cora picked up from the library floor the length that had dropped from the girl's hand.

"Wasn't it strange—that she should come in and seem so worked-up over the mention of Sea Horse Island?" spoke Belle.

"It was," admitted Cora. "We shall have to find out about it later—she was on the verge of

telling us, when she fainted. But, girls, if I am to go get Jack, it's time I started. Are you coming?"

"Suppose we go in our car," suggested Bess. "You may want all the room you have to spare in yours, Cora, to bring back some of his luggage. And perhaps some of the boys besides Walter may come on from Exmouth with Jack. In that case——"

"Exactly!" laughed Cora. "And, if they do, you want to be in a position to offer them your hospitality. Oh, Bess! And I thought you would be true to Jack; especially when he is so ill!"

"Cora Kimball! I'll——" but Bess, her face flaming scarlet, found no words to express her, at least pretended, indignation. "Come on, Belle," she cried. "We won't let a boy or young man ride in our car, not even if they beg us!"

"Oh, I didn't mean anything!" said Cora, contritely. But Bess simulated indignation.

The throb of motors soon told that the three girls were on their way. Cora in her powerful car, and the twins in their new one, both heading for the railroad station, though the train was not due yet for nearly half an hour, and the run would not take more than ten minutes.

"I wonder if Walter will stay on for a few days?" asked Belle of Bess, who was steering.

"I should think so—yes. He'll probably want to see how Jack stands the trip. Poor Jack!

Isn't it too bad?"

"Yes, and that reminds me. I wonder if he couldn't——"

"Look out for that dog!" fairly screamed Bess, as one rushed barking from a house yard. It was only instinctive screaming on the part of Bess, for it was she herself who "looked-out," to the extent of steering to one side, and so sharply that Belle gasped. And, even at that, the dog was struck a glancing blow by the wheel, and with barks changed to yelps of pain, ran, retreating into the yard whence he had come, limping on three feet.

"Serves him right—for trying to bite a hole in our tires," murmured Bess, with a show of indignation.

A slatternly woman, who had come to the door of the tumble-down house at the sound of the dog's yelps, poured out a volume of vituperation at the girls, most of it, fortunately, being lost in the chugging of the motor.

Three or four other curs came out from various hiding places to commisserate with their fellow, and the girls left behind them a wierd canine chorus.

"Curious, isn't it," observed Belle, "that the poorer the people seem, the more dogs they keep." "What were we talking of?"

"Perhaps misery loves company," quoted Bess.

"Jack?" suggested her sister.

"No, Walter," corrected the other, and they laughed.

"What's the joke?" asked Cora, who had slowed up her car to await the on-coming of her chums. "Did you try to see how near you could miss a dog?"

"Something like that, yes," answered Bess, as she related the occurrence.

There was a period of rather tedious waiting at the station, before a whistle was heard, announcing the approach of some train.

"There it is!" cried Cora, as she jumped from her car to go to the platform.

It was only a freight engine, and the girls were disappointed. But, a few minutes later, the express sounded its blast, and, amid a whirl of dust, and a nerve-racking screech of brakes, drew into the depot.

"There's Jack!" cried Bess, grasping Cora's shoulder, and directing her gaze to a certain Pullman platform.

"And Walter's right behind him!" added Belle. "Why, he isn't carrying Jack!"

"You goose! Jack isn't as ill as all that!" laughed Cora, a bit hysterically. "Oh, Jack!" she called, waving her handkerchief.

"And there's Harry Ward!" murmured Belle. "I didn't know he was coming, and, instinctively, her hands went to her hair. For Harry, whom

Belle had met during the summer, had paid rather marked attention to her—marked even for a summer acquaintance.

"Hello, Sis!" greeted Jack, as he came slowly forward—and in his very slowness Cora read the story of his illness, slight though it was. "It was awfully good of you to come down," he added, as he brushed her cheek in a strictly brotherly kiss.

"My! Look at the welcoming delegation!" scoffed Walter. "I say, fellows, are there any cinders on my necktie?" and he pretended to be very much exercised.

"Oh, it's a sight!" mocked Belle. "Isn't it, girls? How are you, Jack?" she asked, more warmly, as she shook hands. "Oh! Don't you dare—not on this platform!" she cried, as Jack leaned forward, with the evident intention of repeating his osculatory greeting to Cora.

"All right. Come on around back, I'd just as soon," offered Jack, with something of his old, joking manner. "They can't see us there."

"I guess you know Harry—all of you—don't you?" put in Walter.

"Oh, yes, forgetting my manners, as usual," laughed Jack, but there was little of mirth in the sound. "Harry, the girls—the girls—Harry. Pleased to meet you—and all that. Come on, Cora. I guess I'm—tired."

His eyes showed it. Poor Jack was not at all himself.

"But how did it happen—what's the matter?" asked Cora. "Were you suddenly stricken?"

"About like that—yes," admitted Jack. "Trying to do too much, the doc. said. I oughtn't to have made an effort for the double literature. Thought I'd save a term on it. But that, and training too hard, did me up. It's a shame, too, for we have a peach of an eleven!"

"I know, Jack, it is too bad," said Cora, sympathetically.

"Oh, it isn't that I'm actually a non-combatant, Sis, but I've lost my nerve, and what I have left is frayed to a frazzle. I've just got to do nothing but look handsome for the next three months."

"It's a good time to look that way," ventured Bess.

"Look how?" asked Jack.

"Handsome. Tell me about the pretty stranger, Cora."

"What's that?" cried Walter, crowding up. "Handsome stranger? Remember, boys, I saw her first!"

"She means the lace seller," said Belle, languidly.

"Tell you later," Cora promised.

CHAPTER V

INEZ

THEY were at the autos, standing near the edge of the depot platform now. The porter had set down the grips of the boys, and had departed with that touching of the cap, and the expansive smile, which betokens a fifty-cent tip. They do not touch the cap for a quarter any more!

"How'll we piece out?" asked Jack, and his tone was listless. "Who goes with whom?"

His voice was so different from his usual joking, teasing, snapping tones that Cora looked at him again. Yes, her brother was certainly ill, though outwardly it showed only in a thinness of the bronzed cheeks, and a dull, sunken look in the eyes, a desperately tired look, which comes only from mental weariness.

"You'd better ride with me, Jack," his sister said. "The car has more room."

"Walter can come with us," suggested Jack. "I've been sort of leaning on him in the train, and it eases me. So if——"

"Of course!" interrupted Cora quickly, and Walter, hearing his name spoken, came hurrying up, from where he had stood joking and talking with the Robinson twins at their car.

"On the job, Jack, old man!" he exclaimed. "Want me to hold your hand some more?"

"Wrenched my side a little at football," Jack explained to his sister. "It sort of eases it to lean against some one. The porter wanted to get me a pillow, but I'm not an old lady yet—not with Wally around."

"Harry, think you'll be safe with two of them?" asked Walter, as he nodded at Bess and Belle.

"Oh, sure," he answered with a laugh. "If they promise not to rock the boat."

"Perhaps he thinks we can't drive?" suggested Belle, mockingly.

"Far be it from me to so assume!" said Harry, bowing with his hand on his right side, and then quickly transferring it, after the manner of some stage comedian. "I'd go anywhere with you!" he affirmed.

"Don't be rash!" called Jack, who had taken his place in the tonneau of Cora's car. "Come on, Walter. Leave him to his own destruction. But, I say, Cora, what's this about some new girl? Has a pretty arrival struck town? If there has, I'm glad I came home."

"It's just a poor Armenian lace peddler, who fainted from lack of food as she was talking to mother," Cora explained.

"She isn't Armenian—she's Spanish, I'm sure of it," declared Belle, for the cars had not yet started.

"Well, Spanish then," admitted Cora.

"And she's so pretty!" put in Bess.

"Pretty! I suppose you'll be at home this evening, Jack, old chap?" asked Walter, pretending to straighten his tie, and arrange his hair. "Is her name Carmencita or Marita?" he asked.

"We don't know yet," Cora informed him. "The poor child wasn't able to tell us much about herself."

"Child!" exclaimed Jack. "Oh, then she's a little girl! The *Mater* always was great on infant classes."

"Wait until you see," advised Belle, loftily.

"You make me very curious!" mocked the invalided young man. "Drive on, Cora, and let's get the suspense over with."

Walter slipped in beside his chum, and put his arm about Jack's waist, for the wrench given Jack's side in a football scrimmage was far from healed, and often pained him severely. It was this direct cause, as much as anything else, that had pulled him down.

On the way to the Kimball home, Cora driving

slowly and with careful regard for Jack's weakness, the sufferer told how he had "keeled over" in a faint, while playing the last half of a hard game, and how the team physician had insisted on his being sent home.

"And the boys very kindly offered to come with me," ended Jack.

"It's very good of them to spare the time," said Cora, with a decidedly grateful look at Walter.

"As if we wouldn't!" he said, half indignantly.

And so the cars rolled on until they turned in at the gateway of the Kimball home.

"Is she any better, Mother?" asked Cora, when Jack's mother had kissed him, and held him off at arms' length to get a better look at him.

"Who, Cora? Oh, Inez Ralcanto? Yes, she is much better. A good meal was her most pressing need."

"Inez!" murmured Jack. "Charming name. Lead me to Inez!"

"Jack!" cried Cora, in shocked accents.

His mother only smiled. It sounded like the Jack of old, and she was hopefully feeling that he was not as ill as she had been led to fear.

"Did she say anything about herself?" asked Bess, who with Belle and Harry had now come in.

"Yes, she told me her story, and I think she

is anxious to repeat it to you girls," said Mrs. Kimball, looking at the Robinson twins.

"Us?" cried Belle. "Why us in particular?"

"I don't know, but she said one of you had mentioned something about a West Indian Island——"

"Sea Horse," explained Bess, in a low voice.

"That's it—such an odd name," went on Mrs. Kimball. "And she is anxious to know more about your plan of going there. I could not tell her—having heard only the vaguest rumors about your trip, my dears."

"Yes, we are going there—or, at least, father expects to get some orchids there when we are in the West Indies," explained Bess. "But we really know nothing about the island."

"There seems to be some sort of mystery," put in Belle. "Just before she fainted, she spoke of her father. Is her name Inez, Mrs. Kimball?"

"Yes, Inez Ralcanto. She is a Spaniard. But I had rather let her tell you herself, as she is anxious to do. As soon as you are rested——"

"Oh, we're not tired!" interrupted Walter. "That is, unless Jack feels——"

"Oh, never too tired to listen to a pretty girl—especially when she is called Inez," broke in the invalided hero. "Still, perhaps Sis and the twins had better have a first whack at her. I fancy we

fellows would look better with some of the car-grime removed," and he sank rather wearily into a chair.

"You poor boy! You *are* tired!" expostulated his mother, as she put her arms about him. "You had better go to your room, and lie down. We'll have a light dinner served soon. You'll stay, of course," and she included the Robinson twins as well as Walter and Harry in her invitation.

"Oh, I don't know," spoke Harry, diffidently. He had not known the "Cheerful Chelton Crowd" as long as had Walter. "Perhaps I'd better put up at the hotel——"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" broke in Jack. "You and Wally will bunk in here. You forget Inez is due to give a rehearsal of the 'Prisoner of Sea Horse Island,' and you want to be here."

"Don't joke, Jack! It may be serious," said Cora, in a low voice.

"Don't worry, Sis! I feel very far from joking," and Jack put his hand to his head with a weary gesture.

"You must go and lie down," his mother said. "Dr. Blake is coming, and wants to see you. I am also going to have him for Inez. Cora, if you'll show Walter and Mr. Ward——"

"Please call me Harry!" he pleaded.

"Harry, then," and she smiled. "Show them to their rooms—next to Jack's, you know. Then you girls can come up and see our little stranger."

Cora, with her brother and his guests, went up stairs, but soon came down, her face flaming.

"What's the matter?" asked Belle.

"Oh, Jack! I don't believe he's ill at all!" she stormed. "It's only an excuse to escape college."

"What did he do?" asked Bess, slyly.

"Said Walter and Harry might—kiss me!" and Cora's face flushed.

"And—er—did they?" asked Belle.

"Belle Robinson! If you—well!" and Cora closed her lips in a firm line.

Her mother smiled.

"Perhaps we had better go up and see Inez," suggested Mrs. Kimball.

"Yes, do!" urged Cora, eager to change the subject.

The lace seller was sitting up in bed, and the white lounging gown that had been put on her, in exchange for her simple black dress, made her seem the real Spaniard, with her deep, olive complexion. She smiled at the sight of the girls.

"Pardon, Senoritas!" she murmured, as Cora and her chums entered the room. "I am so sorry that I give you ze trouble. It is too bad—I am confused at my poor weakness. But I—I——"

"You needn't apologize one bit!" burst out Cora, generously. "I'm sure you need the rest."

"Yes, Senorita, I was weary—so very weary. It is good—to rest."

"I think you had better have a little more broth," suggested Mrs. Kimball. "Then Dr. Blake will be here, and can say whether it would be wise to give you something more solid. You must have been quite hungry," she added, gently.

"I—I was, Senora—very hungry," and taking the hand of Mrs. Kimball in her own thin, brown one, the girl imprinted a warm kiss on it.

"Do you feel well enough to talk?" asked Cora. "These are my friends. They expect to go to Sea Horse Island soon. You mentioned that, just before you fainted, and——"

"Yes, Senorita, I did. Oh! if I could find someone to take me zere—I would do anyzing—I would serve zem all my life—I would work my fingers to ze bare bones—I would——"

A flood of emotion seemed to choke her words.

"We'll help you all we can," interrupted Cora. "Why are you so anxious to go there?"

"Because my father—my dear father—he is prisoner zere, and if I go zere, I can free him!" and the girl clasped her hands in an appealing gesture.

CHAPTER VI

THE MYSTERIOUS MAN

FOR a moment Cora and the Robinson twins looked alternately at one another, and then at the figure of the frail girl on the bed. She seemed to be weeping, but when she took her hands down from her eyes, there was no trace of tears in them—only a wild, and rather haunting look in her face.

"Is she—do you think she is raving—a little out of her mind?" whispered Belle.

"Hush!" cautioned Cora, but Inez did not seem to have heard.

"I pray your pardon—I should not inflict my emotions on you thus," the lace seller said, with a pretty foreign accent. Only now and then did she mispronounce words—occasionally those with the hard (to her) "th" sound.

"We shall be only too glad to help you," said Cora, gently.

"I do not know zat you can help me, Senorita,"

the girl murmured, "and yet I need help—so much."

She was silent a moment, as though trying to think of the most simple manner in which to tell her story.

"You said your father was a—a prisoner," hesitated Bess, gently. "Did he——"

"He did *nozing,* Senorita!" burst out the girl. "He was thrown into a vile prison for what you call 'politics.' Yet in our country politics are not what zey are here—so open, with all ze papairs printing so much about zem. Spanish politics are more in ze dark—what you call under the hand."

She seemed uncertain whether she had used the right word.

"Underhanded—yes," encouraged Cora, with a smile.

"He had enemies," proceeded the girl. "Oh, zose politics—zose intrigues—I know nozzing of zem—but zey are terrible!" She spread her hands before her face with a natural, tragic gesture.

"But I must not tire you, Senoritas," she resumed. "My father, he was arrested on ze political charges. We lived on Sea Horse Island—it is a Spanish possession of ze West Indies. We were happy zere (it is one grand, beautiful place). Ze waters of ze bay are so blue—so blue—ah!"

She seemed lost in a flood of happy memories,

and then, as swiftly, she apologized for giving away to her feelings.

"I should not tire you," she said.

"Oh, but we just love to hear about it," said Belle, eagerly. "We are going there—to waters blue."

"That I might go wiz you—but no, it is impossible!" the lace seller sighed.

"Tell us your story—perhaps we can help you," suggested Cora.

"I will make for you as little weariness as I can, Senoritas; and, believe me, I am truly grateful to you," she said. "I do not even dare dream zat I could go to my father," sighed Inez, "but perhaps you will be of so great kindness as to take him a message from me. I cannot mail it—he is not allowed to receive letters zat are not read, and we have no secret cipher we might use."

"If we can get a letter to him, rest assured we shall do so," promised Belle, though her sister rather raised her eyebrows at the rashness of the pledge.

"I cannot go into all ze details of ze politics, for I know zem not," went on the Spaniard. "All I painfully know is zat my father was thrown into prison, and our family and home broken up. My mother and I came to New York—to relatives, but alas! my poor mother died. I was left alone. I was desolate.

"I had learned to make lace, and my friends thought I could sell it, so I began to make zat my trade. I thought I could save enough to go back to my father, and the beloved island—perhaps to free him."

"How did you hope to do that?" asked Cora.

"Because, in New York, I found one of his political party—himself an exile, who gave me what you call documents—I know not ze term——"

"Evidence?" suggested Belle.

"Zat is it. Evidence! I have evidence zat would free my father, if I could get it to him. But I fear to send it by mail, for it would be taken—captured by his enemies."

"It's rather complicated—isn't it?" suggested Cora.

"Yes, Senorita—more so even zan I am telling you. Of myself I know but little, save zat if I can get ze certain papairs to my father, he might go free. But how am I to go to Sea Horse Island, when I have not even money to buy me food to keep from starving? I ask you—how can I? And yet I should not trouble you wiz my troubles, Senoritas."

"Oh, but we *want* to help you!" declared Cora, warmly.

"Surely," added Belle. "Perhaps I had better speak to my father. He may know of some-

one on Sea Horse Island, where he is going to gather orchids."

"No, no, Senorita! If you please—not to speak—yet!" broke in the Spanish girl suddenly. "It must be a secret—yet. I have enemies—even here."

"Enemies?" echoed Cora.

"Yes. Zey followed me from New York. Listen, I haf not yet tell you all. I make ze lace in New York, but it so big a city—and so many lace sellers—not of my country. It is hard for me to make even a pittance. Some of my friends, zey say to go out in ze country. So I go. But I weary you—yes?" and with a quick, bird-like glance she asked the question.

"Oh, no, indeed!" answered Cora. Then the girl told of traveling out of New York City, into the surrounding towns, plying her humble calling. She made a bare living, that was all, dwelling in the cheapest places, and subsisting on the coarsest food in order to save her money for her father's cause. Then came a sad day when she was robbed—in one of her stopping places, of her little horde. She told of it with tears in her eyes.

"The poor girl!" murmured Bess, with an instinctive movement toward her pretty, silver purse.

Inez Ralcanto, for such she said was her name, her father being Senor Rafael Ralcanto, was

heartbroken and wellnigh discouraged at her loss. But to live she must continue, and so she did. She made barely enough to live on, by selling her laces, and since reaching Chelton, the day before, she had not sold a penny's worth. Her money was exhausted, and she was nearly on the verge of fainting when she applied at the Kimball home.

Cora's mother had seemed interested in the lace, which really was beautifully worked, and while showing it on the porch, the girl had overheard the mention of her home island. The rest is known to the reader.

"And so I am so silly as to faint!" said Inez, with a little tinkling laugh. "But I faint in good hands—I am so grateful to you!" she went on, warmly, her olive cheeks flushing.

"And you want to go to Sea Horse Island?" asked Belle.

"I want—Oh! so much, Senorita. But I know it is a vain hope. But you are good and kind. If you could take zese papairs wiz you—and manage to get zem to my father—he could tell you how to help him. For it is all politics—he had committed no—what you call crime—not a soul has he wronged. Oh, my poor father!"

"And these papers?" asked Cora. "What are they?"

"I know not, Senorita. I am not versed in such zings. A fellow patriot of my father gave them to me."

"Have you them with you?" asked Bess.

The girl started up in bed, and clutched at her breast. A wild look came over her face.

"I had zem in New York—I bring zem away wiz me. Zat man—he is ze enemy of my father and his party. He know I have zem, and he try to entrap me. But I am too—what you call foxy, for him! I slip through his fingernails. Ze papairs—in my valise—Oh, where is it? I—when I faint—I have it at my feet——"

"It was on the porch!" exclaimed Mrs. Kimball. "I forgot all about it in the excitement. It was full of lace—Oh, if some one has taken it!"

"And my papairs—zat could free my father!" cried the girl.

A shout came from the front of the house.

"That's Walter's voice!" exclaimed Cora, starting up.

"Here, drop that satchel!" came the call.

The girls swept to the window in time to see a small man running down the drive, closely pursued by Walter Pennington. And, as the man fled, he dropped a valise from which trailed a length of lace. The girl, Inez, caught a reflection of the scene in a mirror of the bedroom.

"Zat is him—ze mysterious man!" she cried. "Oh, if he has taken my papairs!" and she seemed about to leap from the bed.

CHAPTER VII

NEW PLANS

"You mustn't do that!" cried Cora. "Hold her, girls!"

"But ze man—my papairs!" fairly screamed the Spanish visitor.

"He has nothing—Walter is after him—he doesn't seem to have taken anything," said Belle, soothingly, as Mrs. Kimball pressed back on the pillow the frail form of the eager girl. Inez struggled for a moment, and then lay quiet.

But she murmured, over and over again:

"Oh, if he has—if he has—my father—he may never see ze outside of ze prison again!"

"We will help you," said Cora's mother, softly. "If there has been a robbery, the authorities shall be notified. I will have one of the girls inquire. You say Walter is down there, Belle?"

"Yes, and a man is running off down the road. I'll go see what it all means."

"I wish you would, please."

The eager gaze of Inez followed Belle as she left the room. The little excitement had proved rather good, than otherwise, for the patient, for there was a glow and flush to her dusky cheeks and her eyes had lost that dull, hopeless look of combined hunger and fear.

Quiet now reigned in the little chamber where the lace seller had been given such a haven of rest.

"What's it all about, Wally?" asked Belle, as she encountered the chum of Cora's brother, who was coming up the side steps bearing a black valise, from which streamed lengths of lace.

"Some enterprising beggar tried to make off with this valise," he said. "I had come down from Jack's room, and was sitting in the library, when I saw him sneak up on the porch, and try to get away with it. He dropped it like a hot potato when I sang out to him. But whose is it? Doesn't look like the one Cora uses when she goes off for a week-end, that is, unless you girls have taken to wearing more lace on your dresses than you used to."

"It belongs to the lace seller—Inez—you know, the one we spoke of," said Belle. "She's here—in a sort of collapse from hunger. And she has told the strangest story—all about a political crime—her father in prison—secret papers and a mysterious man after them."

"Good!" cried Walter, with a short laugh. "I seem to have fitted in just right to foil the villain in getting the papers. Say, better not let Jack know about this, or he'll be on the job, too, and what he needs just now is a rest—eh, Harry?"

"That's it," agreed the other college youth, whom Belle had not noticed since coming downstairs in such haste.

"Wally robbed me of the honors," complained Harry. "I was just going to make after the fellow."

"And was he really going to steal the papers?" asked Belle.

"I don't know as to that," Walter answered. "I don't know anything about any papers. But Harry and I were sitting here, after seeing that Jack was comfortable in his room, waiting for the doctor, when I heard someone come up the steps. At first I thought it was Dr. Blake himself, but when the footsteps became softer, and more stealthy, as the novels have it, I took a quiet observation.

"Then I saw this Italian-looking chap reaching for the valise. I let out a yell, went after him, and he dropped it. Ahem! Nothing like having a first-class hero in the family!" and Walter swelled out his chest, and looked important.

"Better find out, first, whether you saved the papers, or just the empty valise," suggested Harry, with a smile. "Such things have been known to happen, you know."

"That's right!" admitted Walter. "Guess I had better look," and he was proceeding to open the valise when Belle hastily took it from him.

"You mustn't!" she exclaimed. "It isn't ours, and poor little Inez may not like it. I'll take it up to her and she can tell if anything is missing."

"Just tell that I saved it for her—I, Walter Pennington!" begged the owner of that name. "Nothing like making a good impression, from the start, on the pretty stranger," he added. "Eh?"

"Just my luck!" murmured Harry, with a mock-tragic air.

"Oh, you silly boys!" laughed Belle. She hastened up the stairs to the room where Inez was resting, the lace trailing from the half-opened valise.

"Oh, you have it back—my satchel!" gasped the Spanish girl. "Oh, if ze papairs are only safe!"

They were, evidently, for she gave utterance to a sigh of relief when she drew a bundle of crackling documents from a side pocket of the valise, under a pile of filmy lace, at the sight of

which Cora and the girls uttered exclamations of delight. Inez heard them.

"Take it—take it all!" she begged of them, thrusting into Mrs. Kimball's hands a mass of the beautiful cob-webby stuff. "It is all yours, and too little for what you have done for me!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Cora's mother. "This lace is beautiful. I shall be glad to purchase some of it, and pay you well for it—I can't get that kind in the stores. You didn't show me this at first."

"No, Senora, I was too tired. But it is all yours. I care not for it, now zat I have ze papairs safe. Zey are for my—father!"

"Do you really think some man was trying to get them?" asked Cora.

"Oh, yes, Senorita," was the serious answer.

"There was a man up on the stoop—he had the valise, Walter said," put in Belle. "He dropped it and ran."

"Who could he be?" asked Cora.

"An enemy!" fairly hissed the Spanish girl, with something of dramatic intensity. "I tried to keep secret ze fact zat I was working for my father's release. I will not tire you wiz telling you all, but some enemies know I have ze papairs zat prove ze innocence of Senor Ralcanto. Zis man—Pedro Valdez he call himself—has been trying to get zem from me. He tried in

New York, and he said he would give me no rest until he had zem. He must have been following me—no hard task since I have traveled a slow and weary way. Zen, when he saw my valise—he must have thought it his chance."

"How dreadful!" murmured Bess. "To think that such things could happen in Chelton!"

"And perhaps we are not at the end of them yet," said Cora, softly. "The man got away, didn't he, Belle?"

"So Walter said. Oh, dear! I'm glad we're going to the West Indies!"

"Oh, zat I were going wiz you!" exclaimed Inez, clasping her thin, brown hands in an appealing gesture. "But if you will take zese papairs, Senorita, and help to free my father, I will never be able to repay your great kindness."

"We shall have to ask papa about it," said Bess, cautiously. "Would you like to have him come and talk to you—he would understand about the political side of it so much better than we would."

"I would gladly welcome ze senor," said Inez, with a graceful dignity. "I shall be honored if he come."

"I think he'll be glad to," spoke Belle. "He loves anything about politics—he's a reformer, you know."

"And so was my father—he belong to ze re-

form party—but ze others—zey of ze old regime —zey like not reform in Sea Horse Island," chattered Inez. "Zey lose too much money zereby. So my father he is in prison, and I—I am here!" she finished, softly.

"Well, it's all dreadfully mixed up," sighed Cora, "and I believe it will take your father, Bess, to straighten out some of the tangle. Meanwhile, I suppose I'd better put these papers in the safe," for Inez had thrust them into Cora's rather unwilling hands.

"Keep zem safe, if you can Senorita," pleaded the girl. "Zat—zat villain, if I must call him such—zat Valdez may come back for zem."

Mrs. Kimball started.

"Don't worry, mother," said Cora. "Jack is home now, to say nothing of Walter and Harry."

"Oh, my poor boy!" exclaimed his mother. "I must go to him. Dr. Blake ought to be here."

"There comes his car now," volunteered Belle. "I know the sound."

Several events, of no particular importance now followed each other in rapid succession. It was Dr. Blake who had arrived, and he was soon subjecting Jack to a searching medical examination, with the result of which, only, we need concern ourselves. Cora, slipping the bundle of papers the Spanish girl had given her, into the house safe, begged Walter to keep a sharp lookout for

the possible return of the mysterious man, and then she went back to stay with Inez until Dr. Blake should be able to see the foreign visitor. Harry and Walter talked in the library, and Bess and Belle, after a brief chat with the other boys, went home to tell their folks the news, and consult Mr. Robinson about the Spanish prisoner.

"Rest—rest and a change of scene—a complete change is all he needs," had been Dr. Blake's verdict regarding Jack. "If he could go south for the winter, it would be the making of him. He'll come back in the spring a new lad. But a rest and change he must have. His nerves demand it!"

"And we shall see that he gets it," said Mrs. Kimball. "Now about that girl, Doctor."

"Nothing the matter with her—just starved, that's all. The easiest prescription to write in the world. Feed her. You've already got a good start on it. Keep it up."

"Of course you can't advise us about her father, and the story she tells."

"No. She seems sincere, though. As you say, Mr. Robinson, with his business connections, will be the best one at that end of it."

"Poor girl," murmured Cora. "I do hope we can help her."

"She has been helped already," the physician informed her. "And, if I am any judge, by the

past activities of the motor girls, she is in for a great deal more of help in the future," and he laughed and pinched Cora's tanned cheek.

"Will you need to see Jack again?" asked his mother.

"Not until just before he goes away. The less medicine he takes the better, though I'll leave a simple bromide mixture for those shrieking nerves of his—they will cry out once in a while—the ends are all bare—they need padding with new thoughts. Get him away as soon as you can."

It was a new problem for the Kimball family to solve, but they were equal to it. Fortunately, money matters did not stand in the road, and since Jack was not to keep up his studies, and since Cora had "finished," there were no ties of location to hinder.

"I guess we'll all have to go away," sighed Mrs. Kimball. "I had rather counted on a quiet winter in Chelton, but of course now we can't have it."

"Perhaps it will be all for the best," suggested Cora. "If Bess and Belle are going away, I won't have any fun here alone."

A little silence followed this remark. The Robinson twins, who had just come back for an evening call, sat looking at each other. Between them they seemed to hide some secret.

"You tell her, Bess," suggested Belle.

"You, you, dear!"

"Is there—anything?" asked Cora, smiling at her chums.

"Oh, dear, it's the best thing in the world—if you'll consent to it!" burst out Bess. "Listen! Papa and mamma want you to come with us, Cora—to the West Indies. They'd love to have you and your mother."

"We couldn't leave Jack!" said Cora, softly.

"Bring him along!" invited Belle. "It would be just the thing for him—wouldn't it, Dr. Blake?"

"The West Indies? Yes, I should say there couldn't be a better place."

"Oh!" gasped Cora.

"Do say 'yes,' Mrs. Kimball!" pleaded Belle.

"What about poor little Inez?" questioned Cora. "Did you tell your father, Bess?"

"Yes, and he seems to think there may be something in it. He is going to make inquiries. Oh, but let's settle this first. Will you come with us, Mrs. Kimball—Cora? And bring Jack! Oh, it would be just *perfect* to have you with us."

"Could we go, Mother?" Cora pleaded.

"Why, it is all so sudden—and yet there is no good reason why we shouldn't."

"Good!" cried Walter. "I'm coming, too! I never could leave old Jack! Ho, for the West Indies!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE DREAM OF INEZ

"Oh, Walter, are you really going?"

"Do you mean it?"

"Are you joking?"

Thus Belle, Bess and Cora questioned Jack's chum, who stood in the centre of the library, one hand thrust between two buttons of his coat, and the other raised above his head *à la* some political orator of the old school.

"Mean it? Of course I mean it!" he exclaimed, while Dr. Blake chuckled. "I need a rest and change. Anyone will tell you that—er—my appetite is *not* what it once was."

"No, it's on the *increase*," murmured Harry.

"And as for nerves——"

"Nerve, you mean," Harry went on. "You have more than your share."

"There, you see!" declaimed Walter, triumphantly. "I simply need some change."

"Better pay back what you borrowed of me to fee the Pullman porter," went on his tormentor.

"Hush!" ordered Walter, imperiously. "I'll

pay you—when I come back from the West Indies."

"You seem to think it's all settled," laughed Cora.

"It is, as far as I'm concerned," said Walter, coolly. "If I can't go any other way I'll go as valet to Mr. Robinson, or courier to the rest of the family. I can speak the language—*habe Espanola?* Oh, you simply *can't* get along without me—especially as I'll pay my own fare. And Jack'll need me, too. It's all settled."

Mrs. Kimball looked at Dr. Blake. There was a serious and questioning look on her face.

"What do you think, Doctor?" she asked.

"Professionally, I should say it was an excellent chance," he replied. "It would do Jack a world of good, and, though neither you nor Cora seems to be in need of recuperation, I have no doubt you would enjoy the trip."

"Then you simply *must* come!" cried Belle. "I'll 'phone papa at once."

"Not quite so fast, my dear," said Mrs. Kimball, gently. "I must first see if Jack would like it."

"He's sure to," declared Cora, who already had visions of palm-tufted coral islands, and deep blue waters.

"Just tell him he's going," suggested Dr. Blake. "Patients, such as he, don't need much

urging one way or the other. The trouble is, they are too little inclined to resist."

He took up his hat, as a signal that he was going, and once more expressing his professional opinion that the change would be the best possible medicine for Jack, took his leave.

"Let's go up and tell Jack now," suggested Cora, who, the more she thought of the new plan, more cordially welcomed it.

"It might disturb his night's rest," objected her mother. "He has had a hard day, traveling and all that——"

"He seemed very bright," put in Walter. "I think it would give him something good to think of. He's been brooding too much over having to quit the football eleven and his favorite studies."

"Then tell him, by all means," assented Mrs. Kimball. "May we count on you, if we make up a party to go to the West Indies?" she asked of Harry.

"I'm afraid not, thank you. I'd give anything to go, but I can't spare the time from college. Some other occasion, perhaps."

As Walter had predicted, Jack took fire at once on hearing the proposal.

"It'll be great!" he declared. "I've always wanted to go. I wonder what sort of a boat we could get down there, Wally? It would be im-

mense to go on a cruise among those hundreds of islands."

"Time enough to think of that when we get there, old man. Then you'd like to go?"

"I sure would. Tell Mr. Robinson thanks—a hundred times."

"I'll save some of them for to-morrow; it's getting late. Now turn over, and go to sleep."

"Sleep! As if I could sleep with that news! Let's talk about it!"

And they did—the girls coming up with Mrs. Kimball for a brief chat. Then the invalid was ordered to quiet down for the night.

Walter, with Harry, who was to remain at the Kimball residence for a few days, went home with the Robinson twins in their car, Cora trailing along in her automobile to bring back the boys.

The next day nothing was talked of but the prospective trip. Walter wired his people, and received permission to absent himself from college, ostensibly to help look after Jack. As Harry had said, he could not go, but Mrs. Kimball and Cora fully made up their minds to make the journey with Jack, and close up the Chelton home for the winter months.

"But what about Inez and her political problem?" asked Belle, when this much had been settled. "She doesn't want to stay and be, as

she says, a burden on you any longer, poor little girl."

"She's far from being a burden," spoke Cora. "Why, mother says the lace she sold us was the most wonderful bargain, even though we did give her more than she asked for it. And as for making pretty things, why she's a positive genius. My pretty lace handkerchief, that was so badly torn, she mended beautifully. And she is *so* skillful with the needle! Mother says she never need go out peddling lace again. There are any number of shops that would be glad to have her as a worker."

"It's so good she fell into your hands," murmured Bess. "But, as you say, what about her? Papa has looked over her papers, and he says there is really enough evidence in them to free Mr. Ralcanto. Papa even cabled to some business friends in San Juan, and they confirmed enough of Inez's story to make him believe it all.

"Of course I don't understand—I never could make head nor tail of politics, but there seems to be a conspiracy to keep Mr. Ralcanto in jail, and treat him shamefully. Inez did accidentally find the evidence to free him, and her father's enemies tried to get it away from her."

"Then that man whom Walter saw," began Cora, "was——"

"He *might* have been after the papers," inter-

rupted Bess, "and again, he might have been only a tramp, hoping to get a valise full of lace. At any rate, he hasn't been around again."

"Mother told our man John to be on the watch for him," said Cora. "And now let's consider what we are going to do. What shall I need to take in the way of clothes?"

"Only your very lightest, my dear," suggested Belle. "Of course the trip down on the steamer will be cool—at least the first day or so. We'll start in about two weeks. That will bring us to Porto Rico about the beginning of the dry season—the most delightful time."

"And is your father really going to try to have the Spanish prisoner released?" asked Cora.

"He says he is, my dear. And when papa makes up his mind to do a thing, it is generally done," said Bess. "Besides, he has learned that Mr. Ralcanto did some political favors for friends of papa's. That is before the poor man was put in prison. Which brings us back to Inez —what about her, Cora?"

"I have just thought of something," murmured Jack's sister. "As I said, she has several times suggested going, now that she is practically assured that something will be attempted for her father. But I was just wondering why we couldn't take her with us?"

"Of course!" cried Belle.

"Mamma was going to take Janet for a maid," Cora resumed, "but Janet isn't very keen on going. I fancy she thinks the West Indian Islands are inhabited by cannibals."

"The idea!" laughed Bess.

"Well, I found her reading some books on African travel," Cora went on, "and she asked me if the climate wasn't about the same. She seems to think all hot countries are the homes of cannibals. So I imagine Janet will refuse to go—at the last moment."

"Would Inez go, as a maid?" asked Belle.

"I fancy so. She says she has done so before, since the change in her fortunes. And mother and I like her very much. Besides, she speaks Spanish, and that would be a great help."

"Why, Walter said——" began Bess, wonderingly.

"He knows just two words of Spanish, and he speaks them as though he were a German comedian," declared Cora. "Wally is all right otherwise, but as a translator of the Castilian tongue, I wouldn't trust him to ask what time it was," she laughed. "But Inez would be such a help."

"Then why don't you take her?" asked Bess. And, when it had been talked over with Mrs. Kimball, it was practically decided upon.

"Let's go tell Inez," proposed Belle, when the

decision had been reached. "It will be such a surprise to her."

The Spanish girl, though not fully recovered from the long period of insufficient food and weary toil, had insisted upon taking up some of the duties of the Kimball home. But Cora's mother required that she rest a portion of each day to recover her strength. And, as the girls sought her in her own little room (for Inez was anything but a servant), they found her just awakening from a sleep.

"Oh, Senoritas!" she exclaimed, her cheeks flushed under their olive tint. "I have had such a beautiful dream. I dreamed I was back in my own dear country—on Sea Horse Island. Oh, but ze palms waved a welcome to me, and ze waters—ze so blue waters—zey sang a song to me. Ze blue waves broke on ze coral—as I have seen it so often. Oh, but, Senoritas, I was sorry to awaken—so sorry—for it was but a—dream."

"No, Inez, it was not *all* a dream," said Cora, gently. "If you like, you may go back to Sea Horse Island. We will take you to Porto Rico with us, and from there you can easily go to your own island."

"Oh, will you—will you take me, Senoritas?" cried Inez, kneeling at Cora's feet. "Oh, but it is magnificent of you!" and she covered Cora's hands with kisses.

CHAPTER IX

OFF TO WATERS BLUE

"Oh, Jack! Aren't you just wild to go?"

"I don't know, Cora. Anything for a change, I suppose," was the listless answer. "I'd go anywhere—do anything—just to get one good night's sleep again."

"You poor boy! Didn't you rest well?"

A little better than usual, but I'm so dead tired when I wake up—I don't seem to have closed my eyes."

Jack's nervous trouble had taken the turn of insomnia—that bugbear of physician and patient alike—and while the others had their night hours filled with dreams, or half-dreams, of pleasant anticipation, poor Jack tumbled and tossed restlessly.

"I'm sure you will be much better when we get to San Juan," affirmed Cora. "The sea voyage will do you good, and then down there it will be such a change for you."

"I suppose it will," assented her brother. "But just now I don't feel energetic enough even to head a rescue party for Senor Ralcanto."

That remark seemed very serious to Cora, for her brother was of a lively and daring disposition, always the leader in any pranks. Now, his very listlessness told how strong a hold, or, rather, lack of hold, his nerves had on him.

"Never mind," said Cora cheerfully. "Once we get started, and with Wally, Bess and Belle to cheer you up, I'm sure you'll be much better."

"Anything for a change," again assented Jack, without enthusiasm.

Arrangements were rapidly being made. The Kimball and Robinson homes in Chelton would be closed for the winter, for the families planned to stay in the West Indies until spring should have again brought forth the North into its green attire. Walter Pennington had agreed to stay as long as Jack did, and Mrs. Kimball, being of independent means, as were Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, could prolong their cruise indefinitely, if they so desired.

As for the girls, it was like standing on the threshold of a new wonderland. They did not know all the wonders they were about to see, nor did they dream of all the strange experiences and adventures in which they would play an active part.

Inez had communicated with the few distant friends she had in New York, telling them of her great joy in being able to get back to Sea Horse

Island. And her father, too, might find happiness in release from his political prison.

The Spanish girl would go as a maid and companion to Mrs. Kimball, and Inez rejoiced in her new duties. Cora's mother declared Inez was a jewel.

The papers that it was hoped would free Mr. Ralcanto were carefully concealed for taking with the party, for, though Jack and Walter scoffed at the idea of anyone daring to try to get them, Mr. Robinson was not so sanguine.

"Down there conditions are very different from up here," he said. "They haven't the same wholesome regard for law—or, rather, they take it into their own hands, as suits their fancy. And if any one of the political party, opposed to Mr. Ralcanto, was to see a chance, even up north here, I don't doubt but that he'd take it, and make off with the papers.

Of course we might manage to do without them, but there is no use running unnecessary risks. So I'll just put them where they won't find them in a hurry."

A search had been made in Chelton for the mysterious man who had tried to make off with Inez's valise, but all trace of him was lost. He might have been merely a passing tramp.

The girls were in a constant flutter of excitement. There was so much to do, and so many

new garments to secure. The two motor cars were kept in constant use, Bess, Belle and Cora darting back and forth in their respective houses, or to the Chelton shops. Occasionally they made a trip to New York, for something which simply could not properly be had at the home stores.

As for Jack and Walter, they declared that they were ready to start on ten minutes' notice.

"All we have to do is to chuck a few things in a suit case, and buy our tickets," Walter declared. "I always carry a tooth brush with me."

"Wonderful—marvelous!" mocked Bess.

"Superior creatures—aren't they?" suggested Cora, smiling.

And so the preparations went on. The party was to sail in a fruit steamer from New York, and would land at San Juan, where Mr. Robinson had engaged rooms at the best hotel. He expected to do considerable business there, but future plans were not all settled.

"At any rate, we'll have a most glorious time!" declared Bess, "and I'm sure it will do Jack good."

"I think it's done him some good already—just thinking about it," replied Cora. "Though he declares that he doesn't care much, one way or the other. It isn't like Jack to be thus indifferent."

"He doesn't seem so *very* indifferent—just

now," commented Belle, dryly. "He and Walter are trying to explain to Inez how a motor car works—and—I do believe Jack is holding her hand much longer than he needs to, in showing her how the gears are shifted."

The three girls—Cora and her chums—were in Cora's room, making a pretense at packing. They could look down to the drive at the side of the house—where Jack's car stood after a little run. As Belle had said, Jack's indifference seemed partially to have vanished. For he was enthusiastic in imparting some information to Inez.

As I have explained, the position of the pretty Spanish girl was much different from that of an ordinary servant. She was more like a companion. And, now that a rest and good food had rounded out her hollow cheeks, she was distinctively pretty, with that rather bold and handsome type of beauty for which the southern women are so noted. Jack and Walter both seemed much impressed. The girls were not jealous—at least not yet—of Inez.

Inez was so delighted with the prospect of getting back to her own island, and with the chance of helping free her father, that it is doubtful if she looked upon Jack and Walter with any more seeing eyes than those which she would have directed to small boys at their play. She liked them

—she liked them to show her about the automobile, and she laughed frankly with them—but she was totally ingenuous.

"And she could be so—so dangerous—if she chose," murmured Belle.

"What do you mean?" asked Cora.

"I mean—with her langorous eyes," was the murmured reply.

Cora looked sharply at her chum, but said nothing.

The last gown had been delivered, and the trunks needed but the straps around them to close their lids. The Chelton houses had been put in readiness for their lonely winter, and already the tang of frost in the late October air had brought the advance message of Jack Frost.

Some few purchases remained for Mrs. Robinson and Mrs. Kimball to make, but these were deferred until the trip to New York to take the steamer. They would remain a day or so in the metropolis before sailing.

"One last run in our cars, and then we'll put them away," suggested Cora to her chums.

"We'll come along," Jack invited himself and Walter. They had a glorious day in the open. Then the gasoline tanks were emptied, the radiators drained, and the cars put away in the garage.

"I do hope we can do some motor boating

down there," said Jack, with something like a return of his former interest.

"We shall, I'm sure," said Bess. "They say it is ideal for the sport there."

Inez had sent word to her father that an attempt would be made to free him. That is, she had sent the message. Whether it would reach him or not was another question, for his political enemies had him pretty well hedged about.

New York was no novelty to our friends, for they often ran in during the winter. The days there were busy ones, and passed quickly.

Their luggage was put aboard the steamer, the last purchases had been made, and now they were ready themselves to walk up the gang-plank.

"Well, girls, are you all ready to leave?" asked Mr. Robinson, as he came on deck.

"All ready—for waters blue!" half chanted Cora.

"Inez," she asked, "would you mind going down and seeing if mother has everything she wants?"

"I go, Senorita," murmured the Spanish girl.

As she turned to make her way to Mrs. Kimball's stateroom, Inez started and drew back, at the sight of a very fat man just coming aboard.

"Zat man! Here!" she gasped, and Cora turned to see Inez shrink out of sight behind one of the lifeboats.

CHAPTER X

THE BLUE WATERS

"WHAT is the matter, my dear girl?" asked Cora, when she had recovered from the little start Inez gave her. "Did that man do anything—or speak to you?" and she looked indignantly about for a ship's officer to whom to complain.

"No! No—not that!" cried the Spanish girl, quickly. "He did not speak—he did not even look!"

"Then why are you so alarmed?"

"It is because I know zat man—I know him when I am in New York before. He try to find out from me about my father," and a shivering, as if of fear, seemed to take possession of the timid girl.

"Do you mean he belonged to the political party that put your father in prison?"

"Zat is it. Oh, but zese politics! I know not what zey mean, but zey are trouble—trouble always. Now zat man he is here—he is looking for me, I am sure."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Cora, determined,

whether she believed it or not, to make light of the matter, for Inez was certainly much alarmed.

"I don't believe he even knows you are on board," Jack's sister went on. "But we'll speak to Mr. Robinson about it. He'll know what to do. Do you think that man saw you?"

"I know not, Senorita Cora. But I am much afraid!" There was no doubt of that; the girl's eyes, and every movement, showed her alarm.

"Come along!" Cora forced herself to say brightly. "We'll soon settle this matter. We'll find out who that man is, and——"

"Oh, no! No, Senorita. Do not trouble. If you should do zat, zis man would only make matters worse for my poor father. Let him alone!"

"And have you, and us, worrying all the time on this voyage? Indeed I'll not."

This was not Cora's way. She never shrank from doing what she considered to be her duty. In this case her duty lay in finding out whether or not there was a real, or fancied enemy, of Mr. Ralcanto's aboard.

The man, who had caused this little flurry of excitement, had, by this time, gone down to his stateroom. Other belated passengers were hurrying aboard, the last consignment of freight was being brought to the dock, and preparations for leaving were multiplying.

"I might as well wait until I can see him, or you can point him out to me again," said Cora, "and then I'll show him to Mr. Robinson. He can speak to the captain, and find out who the big man is."

"Very well, Senorita," assented Inez. "But I do not wish to give annoyance. I have already been such a burden——"

"Nonsense!" Cora cried. "We've undertaken this business of getting your father out of that political prison, and we're going to do it. I think we're going to start now."

There was little doubt about it. Bells were jingling, whistles were blowing and men were hoarsely shouting. Then the gang-plank was pulled to the dock, away from the steamer's side, just after a last belated passenger had run up it. Mooring ropes were cast off, and then with a blast from her siren, that fairly made the decks tremble, the ship was slowly pushed out into the river to drop down the harbor, and so on her way to Porto Rico.

It was just before the pilot was about to leave, that Cora got a chance to carry out her intention of drawing the attention of Mr. Robinson to the mysterious man who had so seriously alarmed Inez.

The personal baggage of our travelers had been put away in the respective staterooms, and

they were all up on deck watching the scenes about the harbor.

Inez, who was standing near Mrs. Kimball and Cora, suddenly gave a start, and, touching Jack's sister on the arm, whispered:

"There he is! And he is looking right at me!"

Cora turned quickly. She did behold the gaze of the fat man directed in rather scrutinizing fashion on the Spanish girl, and, as he saw that he was attracting attention, he quickly averted his eyes. In appearance he was a Cuban or Spaniard, well dressed and prosperous looking, but not of prepossessing appearance.

At that moment Mr. Robinson strolled past, talking to the captain whom he knew, for the twins' father had long been engaged in a branch of the coffee importing business, and had much to do with ships.

"Now is my chance," thought Cora. "I'll find out who that man is."

She whispered to Inez to keep the mysterious stranger in view, while she herself went to speak to Mr. Robinson and the captain. She had previously been introduced to the commander, and found him most agreeable.

Cora quickly explained to Mr. Robinson the little alarm Inez had experienced, and requested him to find out, from the captain, who the man was.

"That man?" queried the commander, in answer to Mr. Robinson's question. "Why, he is an old traveler, with me. He goes up and down to Porto Rico quite often. He's a coffee merchant, Miguel Ramo by name, and very wealthy, I believe. Do you wish to meet him?"

"Oh, no!" said Cora hastily, and with a meaning look at Mr. Robinson, "I—I just wanted to know who he was."

"He has a very interesting personality," went on the captain. "He has been through a number of revolutions in his own native country, of Venezuela, and, I believe, has mixed up, more or less, with politics in Porto Rico. He tells some queer stories."

"Perhaps I shall be glad to make his acquaintance, later," murmured Mr. Robinson, as Cora, with a meaning look, slipped away. She had found out part of what she wanted to know.

While Mr. Robinson and the captain continued their stroll along deck, Cora slipped to where Inez was waiting.

"Do you know a Senor Miguel Ramo?" asked Jack's sister.

Inez puckered her brow in thought.

"No," she said slowly, "I do not know ze name, but I am sure zat man was on Sea Horse Island when my father was taken to prison. I am fearful of him."

"Well, you needn't be," declared Cora,

brightly. "Remember you're with us, and under the protection of Mr. Robinson. Besides, that man seems well known to Captain Watson, and, even if he is a revolutionist, he may not be a bad one."

Inez shook her head. The sad experiences through which she had passed had not tended to make her brave and self-reliant, as was Cora. But, even at that, Inez could not but feel the helpful influence of the motor girls, and already, from their influence, she had gained much.

Out of seeming confusion and chaos came order and discipline, and soon matters were running smoothly aboard the vessel. Jack and Walter came up on deck, with Bess and Belle, and the young people, including Inez, who was regarded more as a companion than as a maid, formed one of the group that watched the shores and ships slipping past, as they went through the Narrows, and out into the bay.

Cora told of the little alarm Inez had experienced, and Walter was at once anxious to establish a sort of espionage over the suspect. Jack agreed with him, and doubtless they would have constituted themselves a committee of two to "dog" the footsteps of the fat man, had not Cora firmly interfered.

"Mr. Robinson is looking after him," said Jack's sister," and he'll do all that is necessary.

Besides, I don't believe that man is the one Inez thinks he is. She isn't quite so sure as she was; are you?"

"No, Senorita. And yet—I know not why—but I am of a fear about him."

"Don't you worry—I'll look out for you!" said Jack, taking her hand, which Inez, with a pretty blush, hastily snatched away from him.

The pilot was "dropped," and then began the real voyage of about fifteen hundred miles to San Juan. It was destined to be uneventful, so we shall not concern ourselves with it, except to say that though Mr. Robinson kept a close watch on Senor Ramo, he could detect nothing that could connect him with the imprisonment of the father of Inez. If the coffee merchant were in any way responsible, he betrayed no sign of it, not even when Mr. Robinson, in conversation with him, introduced the name of Senor Ralcanto. So, unless the fat man was an excellent actor, it was decided Inez had been mistaken.

She herself, however, would not admit this, and continued to believe the man an enemy of her family. She avoided meeting him, and when she saw him on deck, she went back to her stateroom.

The weather had been cold, sharp and rather dreary on leaving New York, and warm clothing and coats were in demand. But in a day or so

the balmy winds of the south began to make themselves felt, and the travelers were glad to don lighter clothing.

Mr. Robinson had been to Cuba, though not to Porto Rico, but the islands are much the same, and his knowledge of one sufficed for the other. Inez, too, was of service to the girls and the two ladies, in telling them what to wear.

Mr. Robinson and the boys were comfortable in suits of thin Scotch tweed, once the southern limits were reached, and later they changed to linen of the kind they used during their stay. Mrs. Robinson, Mrs. Kimball, and the girls, varied from brown silks to linens, and found them perfectly well suited to the climate.

The days slipped by. The sun became warmer and warmer, and then, one morning, as the party came on deck after breakfast, Cora, going forward, called out:

"Oh, see how blue the water is!"

"Isn't it!" agreed Bess.

"How beautiful!" murmured Belle.

"Now we are coming to my country," said Inez, softly. "Off there is Porto Rico, and beyond—beyond—is Sea Horse Island—and—my father!"

There were traces of tears in her eyes. Cora softly slipped her hand into that of the pretty refugee.

CHAPTER XI

IN SAN JUAN

THE anchor splashed into the blue waters of San Juan Bay. The ship swung around at her cable, and came to rest, and then up came the small boats with their skippers, eager to obtain fares and the transportation of baggage. Sailing craft there were, puffing tugs, old-fashioned naphtha launches and the more modern gasoline launches, all swarming about the steamer.

"Look at that!" cried Jack, as he viewed the scene before him. "What does it all mean? Why don't we go up to the dock in regular style, and not stop away out here?"

"There aren't any really good docks in San Juan, though there may be some built soon," said Mr. Robinson. "We'll have to go ashore in some of these craft. They're all right. I'll see to our luggage."

"Well, this is some different from New York," commented Jack.

"Yes, and that's the beauty of it," remarked his sister. "It is the change that is going to do

you good, Jack dear," and she smiled at him, brightly.

"I'm beginning to feel better already, Sis," he answered, and there was a keener look in his eyes that had been so tired, while his cheeks were flushed with the warmth of the air, and the excitement in anticipation of new scenes.

"Well, get ready, girls!" called Mr. Robinson. "Get all your furbelows and fixings together, and we'll go ashore in one of these boats. My! but it's warm!"

It was hot, with the heat of the tropics, for the rainy season was not yet fully over, though it was approaching its end, and more pleasant weather might be expected.

Porto Rico, I might explain, nearly resembles the climate of Florida, though it is not quite so hot in summer, nor so cold in winter. It is nearly always like June in Porto Rico, the thermometer then, and in July, reaching its maximum of eighty-six, the average being seventy-two.

Mr. Robinson bargained with the skipper of a large and new motor boat to take him, his party and their baggage ashore, and when the trunks and bags had been transferred, off they started over the blue waters toward the small docks, at which were congregated many small fishing craft.

"Oh, but it is beautiful!" exclaimed Cora, as she looked down into the waters, which were of

an intense blue, even close to shore. That is characteristic of this coral land, the ocean near the coast being always that blue, except where it is colored by the inflowing of some large stream.

Before them lay the city itself, a city of many white buildings, the color of which met and blended with the tints of the mountains beyond, and those tints varied from olive green, into olive brown, indigo, and, in some places, even to the more brilliant ultramarine. The motor girls gazed at the scene with eager eyes, and into those of Inez came tears of joy, for she was, every minute, coming nearer and nearer to the land she loved—the land where her father was a prisoner.

Up to the small dock puffed the motor boat, and when Mr. Robinson demanded to know the price, the boatman named a sum that instantly brought forth a voluble protest from the Spanish girl. At once she and the boatman engaged in a verbal duel.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Bess. "What can have happened? Is he some brigand who wants to carry us off?"

"Or a pirate?" suggested Jack. "He looks like one. Wally, have you a revolver with you?"

"Don't you dare!" cried Belle, covering her ears with her hands.

"He want to charge two pesos too much!" explained Inez, when she had her breath. "It is

not lawful!" and once more she expostulated in Spanish.

The boatman, with a shrug of his shoulders, as much as to ask, "How can one quarrel with a woman?" accepted the amount Inez picked out from the change Mr. Robinson held out, and then they went ashore, their luggage being put on the pier.

The boatman was sullen about the failure of his trick, until Mr. Robinson, who was an experienced traveler, slipped him a coin, which must have been large enough to make up for the disappointment, for the man murmured: "*Muchas gracias!*" and fell to with a will to help the travelers get their belongings into a carriage.

"What did he say to papa?" asked Bess, of Inez.

"Many thanks," translated the Spanish girl.

"I must practice that!" spoke Jack. "What else do you say in this country, Inez?"

"Oh, many zings, Senor," and she blushed prettily. "It all depends on what you want. But many here speak ze English as you do. Zere is little trouble."

"What would I do if I wanted a glass of ice-cream soda water?" asked Walter. "And I feel like one now."

"Zere is not so much of your ice-cream soda here," went on Inez, "but ozer drinks are of a

goodness. Cocoanut milk is much nice. If in a store you go, say '*Quiero*' (ke-a-ro), which means 'I want.' And zen name zat which you desire. You will of a soon learn ze Spanish for many zings."

"And how shall we know what to pay?" asked Bess.

"Say '*Cuanto?*'" directed Inez. "*Cuanto* (koo-ahn-to) means 'how much,' and the man will soon tell you—if, indeed, he does not tell you too much. But you will soon learn."

"I have a better way than all this *cuanto* and *quiero* business," spoke Walter.

"How?" asked Jack. "Show me."

"Go in the place, make a noise like the article you want, or, better still, go pick it out from the shelves, hold out a handful of money, and let the fellow help himself," was Walter's way out of the difficulty. "He'll probably leave you enough for carfare."

"Well, that's a good way, too," agreed Jack. "We'll try both."

The travelers were distributed in two carriages, their heavy luggage being put in a wagon to follow them to the hotel. On the way to their stopping place, Cora and her chums were much interested in the various sights. They had come to a typical tropical Spanish city, though it was under the dominion of the United States.

No one seemed in a hurry, and though there were many whites, including Spaniards, to be seen, the majority of the inhabitants were of negro blood, the gradations being from very black to a mulatto, with a curious reddish tinge, in hair and skin, showing Spanish blood.

It was quite a different hotel from the one they had stopped at in New York, there being none of that smartness of service one looks for in the metropolis.

But the rooms were comfortable, and the travelers were assured of good cooking, Inez said. However, there was a penetrating odor of onion and garlic from the direction of the kitchen, that made Jack say to his mother, apprehensively:

"I say, *Mater,* you know I can't go onions, especially since I am down on my feed. What'll I do? I can stand their red pepper, but onions—never!"

"You shall but ask zat none be put in your food, and none will," said Inez. "Many travelers do so. I, myself, do not like onions any more."

"I'm glad of it!" said Jack. "You can sit next to me at table, Inez," whereat she blushed under her olive hue.

Mr. Robinson, seeing that the ladies, girls and youths were comfortably settled in their new quarters, went off to see some business associates,

promising to come back in time for an afternoon drive, following the *siesta.*

" For everyone takes a *siesta,*" explained Inez, speaking of the " afternoon nap."

The drive about the city, and out a distance into the country, was enjoyed by all. Jack seemed to be improving hourly, and his mother and sister assured each other that no mistake had been made in bringing him to Porto Rico.

" And, now that we have him in a fair way to getting better, we must see what we can do to help Inez," said Cora. " I am sure she will never be happy, until she is on her way to Sea Horse Island, and is able to start measures for freeing her father."

" I fancy we had better let Mr. Robinson attend to those matters," Mrs. Kimball said. " He knows best what moves to make. Poor girl! I know just how she feels."

The party stopped for a while to look at the statue of Columbus, who discovered Porto Rico on his second voyage. From there, they drove about the city, admiring the various buildings of Spanish architecture, and, as a finish to the drive, went to the old morro—fort or castle—of San Juan. All signs of the bombardment by Admiral Sampson's fleet, during the Spanish-American War, had been done away with. It was a place of interest to them all, for it was very old, and

had withstood many attacks. They went through the watch-tower and also the lighthouse.

"Well, I think we've done enough for one day," announced Cora, as they started back for the hotel. "I'm quite done out, and I'm sure Jack must be tired."

"A little," he admitted.

A concert in the evening, a stroll about the plaza, watching the pretty Spanish girls, and the homely duennas, brought the day to a close.

"And now for bed," sighed Cora. "I wonder if one dreams in San Juan any differently than in Chelton?"

"Cheerful Chelton!" cried Bess. "Doesn't it seem far away!"

All the rooms of our party were near together on the same corridor, Bess, Belle and Cora having connecting apartments. They left the doors open between, and it was due to this that Cora heard, soon after falling into a light doze, the voice of Belle calling her.

"Cora! Cora!" came the entreaty.

"Yes—what is it?" asked Cora, sleepily.

"Some one is in my room!" hissed Belle, in a stage whisper.

"Oh!" cried Cora, and she sat up suddenly, and pulled the cord of the electric light.

CHAPTER XII

LEFT ALONE

THE flood of radiance from the electric light shone from Cora's room, into that where Belle was, and with the gleam of the modern illumination, Cora's bravery grew apace.

"What did you say, Belle?" she asked, now quite wide awake. "Are you ill?"

"No, but, oh! I'm so frightened. There's some one in my room! I'm sure of it!"

"Nonsense!"

"I tell you I can hear some one walking around!" insisted Belle.

"Did you get up and look?" asked Cora.

"Did I get up? Indeed I did not!" was the indignant answer. "I'm scared stiff as it is."

"And you want me to look!" murmured Cora.

"Oh, but you have your light lit, Cora dear. And really I am afraid to get up. Do come and see what it is. Perhaps it's only one of those large fruit bats that Inez told us about."

"A bat! Indeed I'll not come in and have it get tangled in my hair!" objected Cora. "I'm going to call some one of the hotel help."

But there was no need, for Jack, whose room was across the corridor from that of his sister, heard the talking, and, getting into a dressing gown and slippers, he knocked at Cora's door.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Belle thinks she hears something—in her room."

"It's in mine, now," called out Bess, whose apartment was beyond that of her sister.

"Open the door, and I'll have a look," suggested Jack, good-naturedly.

"Wait a minute," Cora said, and, slipping into a robe she admitted her brother.

"Now we'll see what's going on," he promised. "Cover up your heads, girls," he called to Bess and Belle, as he and Cora went into the room of the latter. "If it's a villain, you won't get nervous when you see me squelch him."

"Oh!" faintly murmured Belle, as she pulled the covers over her head. Jack groped for the electric switch and fonnd it, making light Belle's room.

"I don't see a thing," he announced, looking carefully about.

"It—it's in here!" said Bess, faintly. "I can hear it walking about. It's rattling some papers in a corner of my room."

Jack and Cora went on through to the farther apartment, and Jack, turning on the light there,

approached a pile of paper Bess had tossed in one corner after unwrapping some purchases made during the day.

"Look out!" warned Cora, while Bess adopted the same protective measures as had her sister. "It may be a rat—or—or—something!"

"Most likely—something," said Jack. He began picking up piece after piece of paper, and then he suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"Ah! Would you!" he snapped, and, standing on one foot, he took the slipper from the other, holding his bare member carefully off the floor, while he slapped viciously at the pile of papers with his bedroom weapon.

"Got him!" he announced triumphantly, after two or three blows.

"What was it—a bat?" asked Bess, in muffled tones.

"A centipede," answered Jack. "A big one, too. About seven inches long."

"And their bite is—death!" murmured Bess, in awe-stricken tones.

"Nothing of the sort, though it's very painful," said Jack, shortly. "Just as well to keep clear of them, however. I'll throw this defunct specimen out of the window."

"Please do, and be sure my screen is down," begged Bess. "I wonder how he got in?"

"Oh, there are more or less of them in all

hotels, I guess," said Jack, cheerfully enough.

"Don't you dare say so!" cried Belle. "Please look around my room, and leave the light burning. I know I'll never sleep a wink."

Jack tossed out the centipede he had killed, and then looked among the waste paper for more, standing with his bare foot raised, and with ready slipper, for the bite of this insect, which grows to a large size in Porto Rico, is anything but pleasant, though it is said never to cause death, except perhaps in the case of some person whose blood is very much impoverished.

Both Bess and Belle insisted on their lights being left aglow, though Jack made a careful search and could discover no more of the unpleasant visitors. How Belle had heard the one in her room, if it really had been that which she said made the noise, was a mystery, but the creature might have rattled paper as it did in the room of Bess.

"Call me if you want anything more, Sis," said Jack to his sister, as he started back to his own apartment. And then, as he was about to close Cora's door Jack looked fixedly at a place on the floor near her bureau, and with a muttered exclamation hurried toward it.

"Oh! what is it?" his sister begged, alarmed at the look on his face.

"Another one—trying to hide," he murmured.

Off came his slipper again, and there followed a resounding whack on the floor.

"Got that one, too!" Jack announced, and then, as Cora, made brave by the declaration of the death, came closer, she uttered a cry.

"Jack Kimball!" she gasped, accusingly, "you've broken my best barrette, and she picked up from the floor the shattered fragments of a dark celluloid hair comb, which had fallen from the bureau.

"Barrette," murmured Jack, in dazed tones.

"Yes—a sort of side comb, only it goes in the back."

"Well, it looked just like a centipede trying to hide under the bureau," Jack defended himself. "Is it much damaged?"

"Damaged? It's utterly ruined," sighed Cora. "Never mind, Jack, you meant all right," and she smiled at her brother.

"Oh, dear! I don't believe I'm going to like it here, even if the waters are such a heavenly blue."

"What was it—another?" demanded Belle.

"It was my barrette, my dear," laughed Cora.

"Come, young folks! You must quiet down!" came the voice of Cora's mother from the next room. "What's all the excitement about?"

"Just—insects," said Jack, with a chuckle. "We are hunting the deadly *barrette de side-comb.*"

"You'll have to get me another," said Cora, as she bade Jack good-night.

There was no further disturbance, and the hotel clerk said, next morning, that the presence of one or two scorpions, or centipedes, could be accounted for from the fact that the rooms occupied by our friends had not recently been used. He promised to see to it that all undesirable visitors were hunted out during the day.

For a week or more, life in San Juan was an experience of delight for the motor girls. They visited points of interest in and about the city, taking Inez with them. Of course Jack and Walter also went, and the change was doing the former a world of good.

The mysterious "fat man," as Jack insisted on calling Senor Ramo, had not come ashore at San Juan, going on with the steamer. His destination was another of the many West Indian islands.

As yet, Mr. Robinson had had no chance to communicate with, or make arrangements for rescuing the father of Inez. But he was making careful plans to do this, and now, being on the ground, he could confirm some information difficult to get at in New York.

The motor girls, and their party, soon accustomed themselves to the changed conditions. They learned to eat as the Porto Ricans do—little meat —making eggs take the place, and they never

knew before in what a variety of ways eggs could be served.

The weather was growing more pleasant each day, and with the gradual passing of the hurricane season, they were allowed to take longer trips in one of the many motor boats with which the harbor abounded.

Sometimes they spent whole days on the water, their dusky captain keeping a sharp watchout for hurricanes. These can be detected some hours off, and a run made for safety. Some of the whirling storms are very dangerous, and others merely squalls.

It was when they had been in San Juan about a month, and Mr. Robinson had promised, in the next few days, to take some measures regarding the liberation of Senor Ralcanto, that something occurred which changed the whole aspect of the visit of the motor girls to waters blue.

Mr. Robinson found that he would have to go on business to a coffee plantation near Basse Terre, on the French island of Guadeloupe, and as he had heard there were also rare orchids to be obtained there, he wanted to stay a few days after his trade matters had been attended to.

"But I did want to start for Sea Horse Island, and begin my plans to liberate your father," he said to Inez.

"It can wait, Senor," she said, softly. "A few

days more will not make much of ze difference, as long as he is to be rescued anyhow. I would not have you disappointed in ze orchids."

"Then I'll go when we come back," said Mr. Robinson. "I'll go to Guadeloupe, and take my wife and Mrs. Kimball with me. I want them to see the place."

"And leave us here alone?" asked Bess.

"Certainly, why not? You are in good hands at the hotel, especially as the boys are with you. And Inez is as good as a guide and European courier made into one."

The weather, which had been fine on the evening when Mr. Robinson and the two ladies went aboard the steamer, underwent a sudden change before morning, and when Cora and her chums awoke in the hotel, and looked out, they found raging a storm that, in its fury, was little short of a hurricane.

"Oh, Jack!" his sister exclaimed, as she listened to the roar of the wind and the sharp swish of the rain, "I'm so afraid!"

"What about? This hotel is a good one."

"I know. But mamma on that ship—they're out at sea now, and——"

She did not finish.

"That's so," spoke Jack, and a troubled look came over his face.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HURRICANE

How the wind howled, and how the rain beat down! Outside the window of Cora's room, the gutters were flush, and running over with seething water. In the street below there was a river, along which bedraggled pedestrians forded their way, envying the patient donkeys drawing the market venders' carts.

At times the wind rose to a fury that rattled the casements, and fairly shook the solid structure of the hotel. Then Cora, who, with Jack, had come up from the breakfast room, clung to her brother, and a look of fear came into her eyes. Nor were Jack's altogether calm.

"What a storm!" murmured the girl.

The door, leading into the next room, opened, and Bess came out.

"Oh, Cora!" she gasped, putting the last touches to her hair, which she had arranged in a new Spanish way she had seen, and then, tiring of it, had gone to her room to put it back in its accustomed form. "Isn't this just awful!"

"Terrible, I say!" came from Belle, who now entered from her apartment.

"It certainly does rain," agreed Jack. "Five minutes ago there wasn't a drop in the street, and now you could float your motor boat there, if you had it, Cora."

"And we may wish we had it, before we're through," chimed in the voice of Walter. They had made of Cora's room, which was the largest of the suite, a sort of gathering place.

"Why so, Wally?" demanded Jack.

"It looks as though we'd be flooded," was his answer.

"Oh, these storms are common down here," put in Bess. "I spoke to Inez about it, and she said the natives here were used to them."

"Such storms as this?" asked Cora, as a fiercer dash of rain, and a sudden blast of wind, seemed about to tear away the windows and let the fury of the elements into the room.

"Well, I suppose that's what she meant," said Bess. "But it is awful, isn't it? And mamma and papa, and your mother, Cora, out on that steamer."

"Oh, they'll be all right," declared Jack. "It's a big steamer, and the captain and crew must be used to the weather down here. They'll know what to do. Probably they ran for harbor when they saw the storm coming. They say skippers

in the West Indies can tell when a storm's due hours ahead."

But that brought little comfort to the girls, and even Walter looked worried as the day wore on and the fury of the storm did not abate. Inez, as one who had lived in the region, was appealed to rather often to say whether this was not the worst she had ever seen.

"Oh, I have seen zem much worse," was her ready answer, "but zey did terrible damage—terrible!"

And, on talking with some of the old residents of San Juan, and with the hotel people, Jack and Walter learned that the storm was a most unusual one.

It was of the nature of a hurricane, but it did not have the sudden sharpness and shortness of attack of those devastating storms. The real hurricane season, due to a change of climatic conditions, was supposed to have passed, and this storm was entirely unlooked for, and unexpected.

It did not blow steadily, as hurricanes did, but in fits and gusts, more disconcerting than a steady blow of more power. The rain, also, came in showers. Now there would not be a drop falling, and again there would be a deluge, blinding in its intensity.

For want of a better name the storm was called a hurricane, though many of the real characteris-

tics were lacking. And, as the dreary day wore on, the motor girls, and the boys, too, felt themselves coming under the spell of fear—not so much for themselves, as for their loved ones aboard the *Romona,* which was the name of the steamer on which Mr. and Mrs. Robinson and Mrs. Kimball had sailed.

"Oh, if anything has happened to them!" sighed Cora.

"Can't we get some news?" asked Bess, faintly.

"Surely there are telegraph lines and cables," spoke Belle.

"There are," the hotel clerk informed them, "but there are so many small islands hereabouts, into the harbor of any one of which the ship may have put, that it would be impossible to say where it was. And not all the islands have means of communication. So I beg of you not to worry, Senoritas. Surely they are safe.

Yet even the clerk, sophisticated as he was, did not believe all he himself said. For the storm, as the girls learned afterward, was almost unprecedented in the West Indies.

There was nothing they could do save to wait until it was over—until it had blown itself out, and then to wait, perhaps longer and with an ever-increasing anxiety, for some news of those who had sailed.

"Oh, if Senor Robinson should be lost!" half sobbed Inez, on the third day of the storm, when it showed no signs of abating. "If he should be lost, my father would be doomed forever to zat prison."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Jack, for it was in talking to Jack and Walter that the Spanish girl gave utterance to these sentiments. "Don't go saying such things around Cora and Bess and Belle, or you'll give them the fidgets. There's no sign the steamer is lost just because it has run into a storm."

"I know, Senor Jack"—for so she called him —"but zere is so much danger. And my father—he is languishing in prison."

"Yes, but we'll have him out. Mr. Robinson didn't take those papers with him, did he—those papers that contain the evidence?"

"No, I have them—he has only ze copies."

"Well, then you needn't worry. When this storm blows over, we'll all get busy on this rescue business!" and Jack spoke with a return of his old energy. He was becoming more like himself every day now, and even the stress and danger of the storm had no hampering effects on him.

"Oh, you Americans!" exclaimed Inez, with a pretty pathetic gesture. "You speak of such queer English—to rescue is no business—it demands intrigue—secrecy."

"Well, we'll make it our business," said Walter, grimly. "But, Inez, don't scare the other girls. We have troubles enough without that, you know, with Mr. Robinson away. Just make a bluff at feeling all right."

"A bluff, Senor—a bluff—a high hill—I am to make a high hill of feeling good?" and she looked puzzled.

"Translate, Jack," begged Walter, hopelessly, and Jack, nothing loath, took Inez off into a corner of the hotel parlor, to explain.

But with all their assumed light-heartedness, the boys were finally genuinely alarmed. Indefinite reports came to the hotel of much danger and damage to shipping, and several large steamers were said to have gone on the reefs which abounded in that region of islands. No direct news came of the *Romona*. In fact, she had not been sighted, or spoken, since leaving San Juan.

"Oh, if anything has happened to her!" sighed Cora.

"There's just as much chance that nothing has happened, as that there has," declared Jack. "She might have gone into any one of a dozen harbors."

"I suppose so, but, somehow, I can't help worrying, Jack."

"I know, little girl," he said, sympathetically.

"But I oughtn't to trouble you," Cora went on.

"Are you really feeling any better, Jack?"

"Heaps; yes. Wally and I are going out to have a look at the water to-day. We're tired of being cooped up here."

"Oh, I wish I could go!"

"Why not? Come along. It will do you girls good."

So it was arranged. The girls, including Inez, donned rubber coats, and, well wrapped up, for it was chilling with the advent of rain, they set forth from the hotel.

They made a struggling way to the sea wall, and there looked out over a foaming waste of waters. In one place where a sunken reef of coral came close to the surface the waves beat and tore at it as though to wrench it up, and cast it ashore. There the sea boiled and seethed in fury.

"A ship wouldn't last long out there," said Walter, quietly.

"I should say not," agreed Jack.

On the beach the waves pounded with sullen fury, making a roar that drowned the voices of the motor girls. Cora and her chums clung to one another as they leaned their bodies against the blast, and peered through the mist.

"Isn't it awful," said Cora, with a shudder.

"Yes—for—for those who have to be out in it," spoke Bess, and, though she mentioned no names, they all knew what she meant.

CHAPTER XIV

NEWS OF SHIPWRECK

CORA, with an impatient, nervous gesture, laid aside the piece of lace upon which she was engaged. The long, breathing sigh which followed her rising from the chair, was audible across the room.

"What's the matter?" asked Bess, who, seated near a window, where the light was best, was industriously engaged in mending a hole in one of her silk stockings. She held it off at arm's length, on her spread-out hand, as if to judge whether the repair would show when the article was worn.

"I just can't do another stitch!" Cora said. "It makes me so—nervous."

"It's beautiful lace—a lovely pattern," spoke Belle, as she picked it up from the table. "I don't see how Inez carries them all in her head," for Cora was working out a model set for her by the Spanish girl.

"Nor I," added Bess. "It's perfectly wonderful."

She glanced at Cora, who had gone to stand by

another window to watch for signs of clearing weather, that, of late, had come with more certain promise.

"There! I think that will do!" announced Bess, as she cut off the silk thread. "I wonder if we shall ever get to the point where we can go without stockings, as the Spanish ladies do here."

"Do they?" asked Cora, absently. "I hadn't noticed."

"They do indeed, my dear," answered her chum. "I read about it, but I didn't believe it until Inez took us to call on Senora Malachita the other day—Belle and I—you didn't come, you know."

"I remember."

"Well, my dear, positively she didn't have any stockings on—only slippers, and she received us that way. Belle and I had all we could do not to laugh, and I wondered if she could be so poor that she couldn't afford them, though her house was beautiful, and the plaza, with its fountain and flowers, a perfect dream.

"But Inez told me that often even the well-to-do Spanish ladies here don't wear stockings, unless they go to church or to a dance. Even then they don't put them on, sometimes, until just before they go into the church. We saw one, riding in on a donkey. She stopped just outside the church,

and put on her stockings as calmly as though they were gloves."

"Fancy!" cried Cora.

"Then you aren't going to follow that fashion?" asked Belle.

"No, indeed!" exclaimed the plump Bess, as she carefully inspected the other stocking for a possible worn place. She did not find it, and sighed in content.

"Aren't you going to finish that lace, Cora?" asked Belle.

"Not now, at any rate. I just can't sit still here and—wait! I want to be doing something."

"But there's nothing to do, dear," objected Belle. "We can't do anything but wait for news of them. And no news is always good news, you know."

"Just because it *has* to be!" retorted Cora. "But, girls, positively, I believe the weather is clearing! Yes, there's a blue patch of sky. Oh, if this storm should be over!"

Her two chums came and stood by her at the casement. Off to the west the dark and sullen sky did seem to be clearing. The rain had ceased some time ago, but the wind was still blowing half a gale, and the boys, who had come back from the docks a short while before, reported that the sea was still very high, and that no ships had ventured to leave the harbor. Then Jack and

Walter went out again, saying they were going to the *marina,* the water plaza.

"Oh, but it is going to clear!" cried Cora, in delight, an hour or so later. "Now we shall get some news of them!"

"Won't it be lovely!" exclaimed Bess. "Oh, I have been so worried!"

"So have I," admitted her sister. "But of course they are safe!"

"Of course," echoed Cora, and yet there was a vague fear within her—a fear that, somehow or other, in spite of her effort for self-control, communicated itself to her voice.

"Let's go out," suggested Belle. "I'm tired of being cooped up here."

"Where are the boys?" asked Cora. "Really we oughtn't to go out so much without them. We'll become talked about!"

"Never!" laughed Bess. "We are Americans, and everything is possible to us."

The others laughed. Before coming to Porto Rico, they had read books about the island, in which stress was laid on Spanish customs, especially about ladies going about without a male member of their family, or some one to serve as a *duenna.* But our friends were too sensible to be hampered by that custom, save at night.

"The boys are probably off enjoying themselves," said Cora. "Jack is so much better. It

has done him a world of good down here. We may meet them. Come on, let's go out. Oh, there's the sun!"

It was shining, for the first time since the storm began, and the girls hastened to take advantage of it.

"Where's Inez?" asked Belle.

"Lying down—she had a little headache," explained Bess. "We won't disturb her, and we won't be gone long."

There was a great outpouring of the inhabitants, all anxious to take advantage of the clearing of the storm, and the streets were soon crowded. The girls went down to the sea wall, at a point where Jack and Walter had made a habit of taking observations from time to time, and there they found the chums.

"Welcome to our city!" laughed Walter, as he greeted the girls. "Won't you come and have something cool to drink? It's going to be insufferably hot!"

And so it promised after the storm, for the sun, coming out with almost tropical warmth, after all the moisture, was fairly sizzling now.

"It sounds nice," spoke Cora. "Oh, Jack, do you think we can get any news of the steamer soon?"

"I think so, Sis. Let's go round by the Morro, and see what the semaphore says."

At the ancient Spanish fort flags were displayed to signal the expected arrival of steamers.

The little party found a refreshment booth and enjoyed the iced and flavored cocoanut milk, which made a most delightful beverage. Then, going on to the fort, they saw, fluttering in the breeze that had succeeded the hurricane, the flags that told of the approach of a steamer.

"I—I hope it brings news," said Cora, softly.

"Good news," supplemented Belle.

"Of course," added her sister.

They strolled back to the *marina,* the business quarter of the town, fronting directly on the water. There, in the activities of the owners of several motor launches, was read the further news of the approach of the first steamer since the storm. The lighters were getting ready to go out to bring ashore the passengers and freight.

As it would probably be some time before the ship came to anchor out in the harbor, the boys and girls went back to the hotel, for it was approaching the dinner hour.

In spite of their anxiety to receive any possible news of the *Romona,* which the incoming steamer might bring, the girls went to their rooms for a *siesta* after the meal—a habit that had really been forced on them, not only by the customs, but by the climate of the place. It was actually too warm to go about in the middle of the day, and espe-

cially now, since the sun had come out exceedingly hot after the storm. Jack and Walter, however, declared that they were going down to the *marina* to get the earliest possible news.

As it chanced, the girls, remaining at the hotel, were the first to hear that which made so great a difference to them.

Cora, Bess and Belle, with Inez, whose head had stopped aching, came down about four o'clock, dressed for a stroll. There was to be a band concert in one of the public parks—the first in several days.

As they went up to the desk to leave their keys, they saw standing talking to the clerk a very stout man, at the sight of whom Inez drew back behind Cora.

"It is him—him again," she whispered.

"Who?"

"Zat man—Senor Ramo—I do not like zat he should see me."

"Oh, you mustn't be so timid," declared Jack's sister. "He won't harm you."

"No, but my father——"

"I think you are mistaken, Inez," went on Cora. "At any rate, he has seen us—he remembers us from having come out on the same steamer with us," for Senor Ramo was now bowing, and a smile spread itself over his oily and expansive countenance.

"Ah, Senorita Kembull!" he mispronounced. "I am charmed to see you again. Also the Senoritas Sparrow—er—I am so forget—I know it is some kind of one of your charming birds—ah!—Robinson—a thousand pardons! I am charmed!" and he bowed low to the twins.

Then his eyes sought the face of Inez, but he showed no recognition, though the significant pause indicated that he expected also to address her. Clearly, if he had seen her on the steamer coming from New York, he did not remember her. There was a questioning look in his eyes.

Inez pinched Cora's arm, and murmured something in her ear. Cora understood at once. Inez did not wish to meet this man, for reasons of her own. He might, or might not, be of the political party opposed to her father, and he might, or might not, have had a hand in placing Senor Ralcanto in prison. Of this Cora could only guess, but there was no mistaking the fear of Inez.

Cora thought of the easiest way out of it. This was to allow Inez to assume the character she had been given—that of a maid.

"Inez, I think I left my fan in my room—will you please get it for me?" requested Cora, at the same time giving the Spanish girl a meaning look.

"Yes, Senorita," was the low-voiced answer, as Inez glided from the foyer.

Senor Ramo seemed to understand. He turned, once more, with a smile to Cora.

"And when may I have the pleasure of paying my respects to your honored mother?" he asked, "and to Senora—er—Robinson, and your father?" he inquired of the twins. "I have but just arrived, after a most stormy passage, from Barbados. Truly I thought we were lost, but we managed to weather the hurricane."

"And we are hoping our folks did, too," said Cora. "We have heard nothing of them since they sailed on the *Romona,* nearly a week ago. Did your steamer hear of that vessel, Senor Ramo?" she asked, eagerly.

"The *Romona* did you say?" he inquired, and there was that in his manner which sent a cold chill of fear to the hearts of the motor girls.

"Yes," answered Cora, huskily. "Oh, has anything happened? Have you heard any news? Tell me! Oh!" and she clutched at her wildly beating heart.

"The *Romona*—a thousand pardons that I am the bearer of ill-tidings—the *Romona* was shipwrecked!" said Senor Ramo. "We picked up some of the sailors from it! Ah, deeply do I regret to have to tell you such news!"

CHAPTER XV

A SEARCH PROPOSED

"CORA, what's the matter? Has this man——?"

It was Jack who spoke, as he suddenly entered the rotunda of the hotel, with Walter, and saw his sister faintly recoiling from the shock of the news brought by Senor Ramo. Jack had a bit of fiery temper, and it had not lessened by his recent nervousness. Then, too, he seemed to have caught some of the Spanish impetuosity since coming to Porto Rico.

"Hush, Jack!" begged Belle. "It's—it's bad news," and there was a trace of tears in her voice.

"Bad news?" chorused Jack and Walter together.

"Yes, Senor Kembull," again mispronounced the Spaniard, "I deeply regret to be the bearer of ill-tidings. I was just telling your sister, and her friends, that the *Romona* has been wrecked."

"The *Romona*—the steamer mother sailed on —wrecked?" cried Jack. "How did it happen—where?"

"As to where, I know not, but it happened, I assume, in the recent hurricane. Indeed, we barely escaped ourselves. I am just in from the *Boldero*. We picked up some refugees near St. Kitts. I did not hear their story in detail, but they said the *Romona* had foundered with all on board!"

"Oh!" gasped Belle, as she sank against Cora. The latter, meanwhile, had somewhat recovered from the shock. Again she was the quick-thinking, emergency-acting Cora Kimball.

"We must find out exactly what happened," she said. "Belle, pull yourself together. Don't you dare faint—everyone is looking at you!"

Perhaps this information, as much as the bottle of ammonia smelling salts, which Cora thrust beneath the nose of her chum, brought Belle to a realization of what part she must play.

"I—I'm all right—now," she faltered. "But, oh! It is so—awful—terrible. Oh—dear!"

"Hope for the best," said Walter kindly, leading her to the ladies' parlor, which was screened, by a grill, from the public foyer. "Often, nowadays, in shipwreck, nearly all are saved, even if the vessel does founder."

"Of a surety—yes!" Senor Ramo hastened to put in. "I am a stupid to blurt out my news so—but I did not think! I ask a thousand and one pardons."

"It doesn't matter," said Jack. "We had to know some time. The sooner the better. We must get busy."

"Always busy—you Americans!" murmured the Spaniard. "If I can be of any service, Senor Kembull——"

"You can take us to where those sailors are that were picked up by your vessel, if you will," interrupted Jack. "I'd like to hear their story, and find out exactly where the *Romona* went down. That is, if it is true that she completely foundered."

"Why, if I may ask?"

"Because, this is only the beginning. There may be a chance of saving some—our folks—if, by any possibility they reached some of the smaller islands. I must see those sailors."

"They will most likely remain aboard the *Boldero*—the vessel on which I arrived," spoke Senor Ramo. "They lost everything but the clothes they wore. Doubtless you could see them on the steamer."

"Then I'm going with you!" cried Cora. "I can't wait, Jack!" she pleaded, as he looked a refusal at her. "I must go!"

"Oh, poor mamma and papa!" half sobbed Bess, for they were now in the seclusion of the ladies' parlor. "Oh, what will become of us?"

"You mustn't give way like this!" objected

Jack. "Now, if ever, is the time to be brave. There is lots to be done!"

Jack was coming into his own again. The trip had worked wonders, but just this touch and spice of danger was needed to bring out his old energetic qualities.

"What can be done?" asked Cora.

"I don't know, yet. I'm going to find out. Maybe it isn't so bad as it sounds after all," replied Jack.

"It sounds bad enough," sighed Cora. "But, Jack, I am with you in this. I simply won't be left out."

"And no one wants to leave you out, Sis. Walter, just see if we can get a carriage, or a motor, to the *marina*. We'll take a boat from there out to the *Boldero*."

"I will give you a letter to the captain," said Senor Ramo. "He knows me well, and he will show you every courtesy."

"Surely," thought Cora, "this man cannot be a political plotter, who would put innocent men in prison. Inez must be mistaken about him. He is very kind."

Some little excitement was caused by the advent of the bad news to our party of friends, and it quickly spread through the hotel. A number of the guests, whose acquaintance the motor girls had made, offered their services, but there was little

they could do. What was most needed was information concerning the wreck.

Inez, who had made the getting of Cora's fan an excuse to go to her room, to escape Senor Ramo, heard the sad tidings, and came down. By this time the "fat suspect," as Jack had nicknamed him, had gone, having scribbled a note of introduction to the captain of the *Boldero*.

"Oh, what is it, Senoritas?" gasped Inez. "Is it zat you are in sorrow?"

"Yes," said Cora, sadly. "Great sorrow, Inez. We have had very bad news," and there were tears in her eyes.

"I sorrow with you," said the impulsive Spanish girl, as she put her arm about Cora. "I was in sorrow myself, and you aided me. Now I must do ze same for you. Command me."

"There is little that can be done, until we learn more," Cora made answer. "The steamer has been wrecked."

"With Senor Robinson, and with the Senoras Kimball and Robinson?" gasped Inez.

"So we hear."

"Ah, zat is indeed of great sorrow. I weep for you. My own little troubles are a nothing. My father may be in prison, but what of zat—he is living—and your mother——"

She did not finish. Walter came in to announce that he had secured a large auto that would take

them to the *marina,* whence they could get a boat to go out to the steamer.

"I only hope those sailors haven't disappeared," murmured Jack. "Now then, are you girls ready?"

"Yes," answered Belle. She, as well as Cora and Bess, had somewhat recovered their composure, after the first sudden shock. Hope had sprung up again, though they were presently to learn on what a slender thread that hope hung. Jack had regained some of his former commanding manner in the emergency.

Inez went with her new friends to the docks. She seemed to have forgotten her own grief in ministering to the girls, and much of her former timid and shrinking manner had disappeared.

They found a large and powerful motor boat that would take them out to the ship, and, indeed, a staunch craft was needed, since there was still a heavy swell on, from the recent storm.

"Are there many boats like this in San Juan?" asked Jack of the man at the wheel, who spoke very good English.

"Not many. There's only one as good, and that's much larger. She's the *Tartar*—and she's a beauty!"

"For charter?"

"Well, maybe. The same man owns her as owns this one, but only large parties engage her."

"Fast and seaworthy?"

"None better."

"That's good," Jack said.

"What are you thinking of?" asked his sister.

"Tell you later," he announced briefly.

"Oh, if it wasn't for the terrible news, how lovely this trip would be!" exclaimed Bess.

They were gliding over the deep, blue waters of the bay, and the golden, setting sun now shone aslant the harbor, pouring its beams over the tops of the distant mountains, and through the palm branches. A promise of fair weather followed on the wings of the storm.

Whatever Senor Ramo might, or might not, be, he certainly procured a welcome for our friends at the *Boldero*. Or, rather, the note Jack presented to the captain did.

"Ah, yes, you desire news of the shipwrecked sailors. Well, they are still here on board. One of them is hurt, but the other can talk. But they speak no English—I had better translate for you."

"First tell us what you know yourself, Captain," begged Cora.

"I know little, except what I have heard, of the foundering of the *Romona*," was the answer.

"Then you think she did go down?" asked Bess.

"I fear so—the sailors we picked up so affirm.

All I can tell you is that, a day or so ago, as we were staggering along through the stress of the storm, the lookout sighted a small boat. No signs of life aboard were seen, but we stopped and picked it up. In the craft, which was one of the lifeboats from the *Romona,* were two sailors, nearly dead from exposure, and one from hurts received."

"How was he hurt?" asked Jack.

"He was shot, Senor."

"Shot!"

"Yes, it appears there was mutiny aboard the *Romona,* as well as the horrors of the storm and shipwreck."

"Mutiny!" murmured Cora, a look of horror in her eyes. "Poor, poor mother!"

"You had better hear the story directly from the sailors," suggested Captain Ponchero. "I will summon the unwounded one. You will find that more satisfactory."

He came, a sorry and unfortunate specimen of a Spanish sailor. There followed a rapid talk, in the Castilian tongue, between him and the captain, and the latter then said:

"His story is this. They ran into the storm soon after leaving San Juan, and could not find, or, rather, did not dare to try, for the nearest harbor, as the seas were running too high to make it safe to go through the narrow entrance. They

had to keep on, and this caused discontent among some of the crew.

"There was an uprising—a mutiny, and some of them tried to leave in the boats. The brave captain would not let them, but he was overpowered, and the mutineers, in the face of certain danger, turned the ship to put back to a harbor which the captain had passed because of the danger of trying to enter it in the storm."

"But how did the sailor get shot?" asked Jack.

"He worked against the mutineers—he and his comrade here," the captain answered. "Then those who had revolted, and seized the ship, ordered into small boats all who would not throw in their lot with them. So these two, with only a little food and water, were put adrift in the storm. It was almost certain death, but the boat lived through it, and we saved them."

"But what of the ship—the passengers?" asked Cora.

"The ship most certainly foundered," declared the captain. "The next morning bits of wreckage were found by these two survivors."

"Then all are lost?" half-sobbed Belle.

"I fear so, Senorita," was the answer of the captain, "unless some few reached islands in small boats."

"Is there a chance of that?" asked Jack.

"A slight chance, yes, Senor."

"Then it's a chance I'm going to take!" cried Jack.

"What do you mean?" asked his sister, wonderingly.

"I mean that we can go in search!" Jack went on, eagerly. "It's worth trying, isn't it, Walter?"

"I should say so—yes, by all means! But what sort of a craft can we get to cruise in?"

"I just heard of one!" said Jack, eagerly. "The *Tartar*. She's a big motor boat, and will be just the thing for us. I'm going to see about it right away. Who's with me for a cruise in the *Tartar?*"

"I am!" came from Cora.

"We're not going to be left behind," said Bess.

"Count on me, of course," spoke Walter, quietly.

"And, Senor Jack—may—may I go?" faltered Inez.

"Of course!"

"Senor—Senor Jack," she spoke in a tremulous whisper. "If you are successful—if you find ze lost ones, and we are near Sea Horse Island, would you leave me zere—wiz my father?"

"Leave you there?" cried Jack. "We'll bring your father away from there, if we get the chance! Now come on! We have lots to do!"

CHAPTER XVI

SENOR RAMO MISSING

JACK's eyes glowed with the brightness of renewed health, and determination, as he looked at his sister, at Bess and Belle, and at Walter. It was like old times, when the motor girls had proposed some novel or daring plan, and the boys had fallen in with it. This time it had been Jack's privilege to make the suggestion, and the others were only too ready to agree.

"Oh, Jack, do you think we can do it?" asked Cora.

"Of course we can!" her brother cried, with a growing, instead of lessening, enthusiasm. "We'll just have to do something, and I can't think of anything better to do—can you? than going off in search of the folks."

"We simply must find them—if they're alive," spoke Bess, rather solemnly.

"We'll find them—alive!" predicted Walter, joining his cheerful efforts to those of his college chum.

"Oh, you Americans—you are so wonderful—

so amazing!" whispered Inez. "I am so glad I am wiz you," and she divided her affectionate looks impartially between Jack and his sister.

"What do you think of it, Captain?" asked Walter of the skipper of the steamship. "Is it possible to go about down among these islands in a big motor boat?"

"Yes, if the boat be large enough, and seaworthy."

"I'm thinking of the *Tartar,*" said Jack. "I heard of her from the engineer of the boat we came out in just now."

"Oh, the *Tartar*. Yes, she is a very fine boat, and quite safe, except in a very bad storm."

"Oh!" gasped Bess.

"But you are not likely to have bad blows now," the captain went on, "especially after this one we've just passed through. It is the last of the hurricane season, I hope. In fact, this was most unusual. Yes, I should say it would be very safe to make a cruise in the *Tartar*. I know the craft well."

"And what are chances of success?" asked Walter in a low voice of the commander, as Jack, with his sister and the Robinson twins withdrew a little apart to discuss the important question of the coming cruise.

Captain Ponchero shrugged his shoulders in truly foreign fashion.

"One cannot tell, Senor," he said in a low voice. "Certainly it is a dubious tale the sailors told—a tale of mutiny and shipwreck. But the sea is a strange place. Many unforeseen things happen on it and in it. I have seen shipwrecked ones come back from almost certain death, and again——"

He hesitated.

"Well?" asked Walter, a bit impatiently. "Might as well hear the worst with the best."

"And again," resumed the captain, "I have seen what would appear to be the safest voyage result in terrible tragedy. So one who knows much of the sea, hesitates to speak with certainty about it. I should say, Senor, that the chance was—worth taking."

"Then we may find some of them alive?"

"You may, and again—you may not. But it is worth trying. If you will come below with me, I will give you the exact longitude and latitude where we picked up the two sailors in the open boat. Then you can put for there, and make it the starting point of your search."

"Good idea," commented Walter.

By this time Jack and the others had finished their little discussion, and were eager to further question the captain concerning all the details he could give about the foundering of the *Romona*. But there was little else that could be told.

The sailors had given all the information they possessed. They repeated again how the ship had suddenly run into a storm, and how the refusal of the captain to put into a port, hard to navigate in a storm, brought on the mutiny.

"But did they see any of our folks—either Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, or Mrs. Kimball?" asked Jack, while his sister and the twins hung breathless on the answer.

The sailors had not especially noticed any passengers. They had been in hard enough straits themselves, not having joined the mutineers.

"But they are certain the ship foundered?" asked Cora.

"There seems to be little doubt of it, Senorita," said the captain. "It was a fearful storm. We had three boats carried away, as well as part of our port rail."

The weather was calm enough now, save for a heavy ground swell. The waters were marvelously blue, and overhead was the blue sky. Seen against the background of the wonderfully tinted hills of palms, the city of San Juan presented a most beautiful picture.

"Well, let's get busy," suggested Jack, and it was only by keeping thus occupied, mentally and physically, that he and his sister, as well as the twins, were enabled not to succumb to the grief that racked them. Belle, rather more nervous

and temperamental than her sister, did give way to a little hysterical crying spell, as they were on their way back to the *marina* from the steamer, but this was due merely to a reaction.

"Don't, dear," said Cora, softly. "We'll find them, never fear!"

She put her arms about her chum, and Inez slipped a slim brown hand into one of Belle's. Then the wave of emotion passed, and the girl was herself again.

"Are you going out for a long cruise?" asked Walter, "or shall you come back to San Juan from time to time? I ask, because I want to send word to my folks not to worry, if they don't hear from me very often."

"I think we'll cruise as long as we can," said Cora, who had assumed as much of the burden of the search as had her brother. "If the *Tartar* is large enough to allow us to take a big enough supply of provisions and stores, we'll cruise until we—well, until we find out for certain what has—happened."

Her voice faltered a little.

"Oh, the *Tartar's* big enough, Senorita," said the engineer of the motor boat in which they were making their way to shore. "You could go for a long cruise in her."

"Then we'll plan that," declared Jack. "Notify your folks accordingly, Wally."

"I shall. But you'll have to have help along, if she's as big as all that, won't you?'

"I suppose so," agreed Jack. "I'm not altogether up to the mark, if it comes to tinkering with a big, balky motor."

"I'd like to go as engineer," said the man at the wheel. "I've often run her, and I know her ways. If you were to ask the owner, Senor Hendos, he'd let me go."

The young people had taken a liking to Joe Alcandor, the obliging young engineer of the motor boat they had engaged to go out to the steamer, and Jack made up his mind, since he had to have help aboard the *Tartar,* to get this individual.

"This is a strange ending to our happy holiday," said Cora, with a sigh, as they left the boat and walked up the steps at the water's edge of the *marina.* The outing, up to now, had been a most happy one, once Jack's improvement in health was noticed.

"It hasn't ended—yet," said Jack, significantly. "There's more ahead of us than behind us."

"I hope more—happiness," said Cora, softly.

"Of course," whispered Jack.

They told Joe they would see Senor Hendos, and arrange with him for chartering the *Tartar.* Then, in two hacks, they made their way back to the hotel. All of them were anxious to get

started on the cruise that might mean so much.

"Do you really mean you'll take me wiz you?" asked Inez, of Cora, as they entered the hotel.

"Of course, my dear! I wouldn't think of leaving you," was the warm answer. "And we need you with us. Besides, you heard what Jack said about your father."

"Oh, will he try to rescue him?"

"I'm sure he will, if it's at all possible."

Something of the news concerning the young Americans was soon current in the hotel, and Cora and her friends were favored with many strange glances, as they walked through the foyer.

"We must thank Senor Ramo for his kindness in giving us the note to the captain," said Cora, ever thoughtful of the nice little courtesies of life.

"Indeed we must," agreed Belle, who had quite recovered her composure, and, save for a suspicious redness of the eyes, showed little of the grief at her heart.

Indeed, they were all rather stunned by the suddenness of the news, and only for the fact that under it lay a great hope, they would not have been able to bear up as well as they did.

The blow was a terrible one—to think that their loved ones were lost in a shipwreck! But there was that merciful hope—that eternal hope, ever springing up to take away the bitterness of death or despair.

There was, too, the necessity of work—hard work, if they were to go off on an unknown and uncertain cruise. And work is, perhaps, even better than hope, to mitigate grief.

So, though the sorrow would have been a terrible one, and almost unbearable, were it not for the ray of light and hope, they were able to hold themselves well together—these young Americans in a strange land.

"Jack, perhaps you had better go and thank Senor Ramo at once," suggested Cora. "He may be able to give you some good advice, too, about fitting up the *Tartar* for the cruise. He seems to know a great deal about these islands."

"I'll see him at once," agreed her brother. "Just send up my card to him, please," he requested the hotel clerk.

"To whom, Senor?"

"To Mr. Ramo."

"But he is not here—he is gone!"

"Gone?" Jack looked at the clerk blankly.

"Yes. He left, Senor, soon after you went away. He said business called him."

"That is strange," murmured Jack.

Inez, who had heard what was said, looked curiously at Cora, and then exclaimed:

"Ze papairs—for my father's release!"

A look of alarm showed in her face, as she hurried toward the stairway that led to her room.

CHAPTER XVII

OFF IN THE "TARTAR"

"WHAT'S the matter?" asked Walter, quickly, as he saw Inez hurrying away. "She seems alarmed about something."

"She is—or fancies she is," answered Cora. "It's about those papers which she hopes will free her father of that political charge which keeps him locked up—poor man."

"Did she lose them?"

"No, but as soon as she heard that Senor Ramo had left suddenly, she associated it with the taking of her documents, evidently."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Walter.

"That's what I say," added Cora. "But we mustn't make fun of Inez—she can't bear it."

"Of course not. Besides, I guess none of us feel very much like making fun," went on Walter.

"Our thanks to Senor Ramo will have to wait," said Jack, as he turned away from the hotel desk to rejoin his party. "And now let's get together, see what we have to take with us, and plan our cruise. I'll look up this man Hendos, who owns

the *Tartar,* and see what arrangements I can make with him. Where's Inez?"

"Gone to her room," answered Cora. "I fancy we'd all better get ready for dinner. It's getting late."

They went up stairs, leaving the buzz of much talk behind them, for many of the hotel guests were speaking of the news concerning our friends.

As Cora was entering her apartment, Inez came out into the corridor in front of her room.

"Zey are gone, Senorita!" she gasped. "Gone!"

"What?" asked Cora, half forgetting, in her own grief and anxiety, what the Spanish girl had gone to ascertain.

"My papairs—for my father! Oh, Senorita, what shall I do?"

"Gone?" echoed Cora. "Do you mean—taken—stolen?"

"I fear so—yes. See, my room has been entered."

There was no doubt of it. A hasty glance showed Cora that, in the absence of Inez, her hotel room had been gone over quickly, but thoroughly. A small, empty valise, which Inez had trustingly hidden under the mattress of the bed, lay on the floor, open. It had contained the papers which were so precious to her. Now they were gone—that was evident.

"Oh, Inez!" cried Cora, and in such a voice that Jack, who was just coming along with Walter, hurried up, inquiring:

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"Those papers Inez had, have been stolen!" cried Cora. "And Senor Ramo is missing—has fled——"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Jack, laying a cautioning finger on his sister's lips. "It won't do to make such rash statements, and draw such damaging conclusions—in such a loud voice, Sis," and he whispered the last words. "These walls are very thin, you know, and these Spanish gentlemen are very punctilious on points of honor. I don't want to be called on to fight a duel on your behalf."

"Oh, Jack, how can you! Such a poor joke!"

"Not a joke at all, I assure you. Now let's have the whole story—but in here," and Jack drew his sister and Inez into the room of the Spanish girl, Walter following. Bess and Belle had gone into their own apartments a little before, and had not heard the talk.

"Just in time," murmured Jack, as he closed the door, having a glimpse of a servant coming along the corridor. "Now, what is it, Inez?" and, after a quick glance about the ransacked apartment, he gazed at the girl.

"My papairs—for my father—zey are gone!"

With a tragic gesture she pointed to the opened valise.

"Was your room this way when you came in?" asked Walter, who rather imagined he was gifted with amateur detective abilities.

"Just like this—yes, Senor Jack."

"Never mind the senor. Just plain Jack will do. And where were the papers?"

"In the valise—in my bed. But they are gone."

There was no doubt of that—also no doubt of the fact that Senor Ramo—the man who was suspected by Inez of being in the plot to keep her father in the political prison—was likewise missing.

"Hum," mused Jack. "It may be merely a coincidence—or, it may not."

"I should say it was not!" declared Walter, positively.

"And get into trouble saying it, Wally," remarked Jack. "No, the best thing to do in this case is to keep quiet about it."

"But my papairs!" cried Inez. "My father —in prison. I must get him out."

"Yes, and I think you can best do it by not letting it be known that you have discovered the theft," Jack said.

"I think that's silly," declared Cora. "Whoever took those papers can't help but know that their loss would be discovered at once. The

condition the room was left in would make that certain. I can't see what good it is to keep quiet about it."

"I'll explain," Jack went on. "The person who did the robbery of course knows he, or she, did it, and knows that we won't be long in finding it out. But the hotel people don't know it yet, nor the guests, and it's possible to keep it from them. They're the ones who will do the talking. Fortunately, the newspapers here aren't like those up home. There won't be any reporters after us, if we keep still."

"But what's the advantage of it?" asked Cora.

"To puzzle and alarm the thief," was Jack's answer. "No doubt he—for I'll assume for the sake of argument that it was a man—will be looking for a hue and cry. He'll expect it, and when it doesn't come, he'll begin to imagine all sort of things."

"I see!" cried Walter. "He'll believe we are on his trail, have a clue and——"

"Exactly!" interrupted Jack. "You're a regular 'deteckertiff,' Wally. That's my game, to puzzle the thief, make him think all sort of things, and so worry him by our very quietness, that he may betray himself."

"Well, maybe that's the best plan," agreed Cora, rather doubtfully.

"But how shall I get my papairs back?" asked

Inez, falteringly. "Ze papairs are needed to get my poor father from prison."

"Maybe not," said Jack, hopefully. "Anyhow, there are copies to be had, aren't there?"

"Yes, but zese were ze originals. I need zem!"

"And we'll get them back for you, if we can," broke in Jack. "We may be able to work without them, if we have a chance to get to Sea Horse Island on our cruise. I think our first duty is to try to find the missing ones."

"Oh, of course, yes, Senor!" cried Inez, quickly. "I should not intrude my poor troubles on you."

"Oh, that's all right," said Jack, good-naturedly. "We have a pretty big contract on our hands, and one trouble more or less isn't going to make much difference. Now don't forget—everybody mum on this robbery. We'll puzzle the thief!"

"Do you think it was Ramo?" asked Cora.

"I don't know. If he had any object in getting those papers we gave him the very chance he needed by all being away from the hotel," answered Jack. "And, if it wasn't he, it was some one else who has an object in keeping Mr. Ralcanto in jail. He'd have the same chance as Ramo had to get the documents. So the person we must look for is some one who really needed the pa-

pers. But, above all, we'll have to be cautious in making inquiries."

"Yes," agreed Cora. "Could you find out when Ramo left, and if he was near this section of the hotel?"

"I'll try," agreed Jack. "Now you girls begin to sort out the things you want to take along on the cruise. Cora, speak to Bess and Belle about it."

"Why, aren't we going to take all our baggage?"

"What! Fill the *Tartar* up with trunks full of fancy dresses, when we'll need every inch of room? I guess not! We'll all get down to light marching equipment. Just take what you can put in a suit-case. That's what Wally and I are going to do."

"Oh, but boys are so different; aren't they, Inez?"

"It matters not to me. A few things are all I have."

The Spanish girl looked helplessly and almost hopelessly at the opened valise. And then, as Jack and Walter went out to find what they could learn by cautious questions, the two girls "tidied up" the room, and went to tell Bess and Belle the news.

Jack and Walter could learn but little. Senor Ramo had departed suddenly, alleging a business

call as an excuse for leaving the island on a steamer that sailed soon after the arrival of the one he had come in on. That was about all that could be safely learned.

Little else could be done, now, toward making plans for the rescue of the father of Inez. When Mr. Robinson was located, he might have something to suggest, but now all energies must be bent on the rescue work.

The news soon spread through the hotel that the "amazing Americans" were about to undertake a most desperate venture—that of cruising about in the blue waters of the Caribbean Sea, in search of their relatives who might have been able to save themselves from the wrecked ship. After a first glance at the map, and a consideration of the situation, Jack had voted for the inside, or Caribbean route, as being less likely to offer danger from storms.

Satsifactory arrangements for chartering the *Tartar* were made, and the engineer, Joe Alcandor, was engaged to look after the machinery, which, on the *Tartar,* was not a little complicated.

"With him along we can be more at ease," said Cora.

"Yes, we won't always have to be worrying that one of the cylinders is missing, or that a new spark plug is needed," added Bess.

"Oh, I do hope we can soon start!" sighed Belle. "This suspense is terrible!"

Indeed, it was not easy for any of them, but perhaps Walter and Jack found it less irksome, for they were very busy preparing for the cruise.

Plans were made to leave some of their baggage at the hotel in San Juan, and the rest would be taken with them. A goodly supply of provisions and stores were put aboard, and a complete account of the events leading up to the cruise, including the story of the missing Ralcanto papers, was written out and forwarded to Mr. Robinson's lawyers in New York.

"That's in case of accident—to us," said Jack.

"Oh, don't speak of accidents!" cried Cora.

The last arrangements were completed. Jack made final and guarded inquiries concerning Ramo, but learned nothing. Then, one fine, sunny morning in December, the little party of motor girls and their friends, who had so often made motor boat trips on the lakes or streams of their own country, set off in the *Tartar* for a cruise on waters blue.

"All aboard!" cried Jack, with an assumption of gaiety he did not feel.

"Oh, I wonder what lies before us?" murmured Cora.

"Courage, Senorita! Perhaps—happiness," said Inez, softly.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SHARK

LOOKING at a map of the West Indies, the reader, if he or she will take that little trouble, will see that the many islands lay in a sort of curved hook, extending from Cuba, the largest, down to Tobago, one of the smallest, just off Trinidad. In fact, Trinidad is a little off-set of the end of the hook, and, for the purpose of this illustration, need not be considered.

The problem, then, that confronted the motor girls, and, no less, Jack and Walter, was to cruise in among these islands, in the hope of finding, on one of them, Mrs. Kimball, and Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, who, by great good fortune, might have been able to save themselves from the wreck of the *Romona.*

Looking at the map again, which is the last time I shall trouble you to do so, the problem might not seem so hard, for there are not so many islands shown.

The difficulty is that few maps show all of them, and even on the best of navigating maps

there may be one or two that are not charted. The shipwrecked ones, providing they lived to get off on a life raft, or in a boat, might as likely have been driven to one of these little islands, as to a larger one.

"But we can cut out a lot of them," said Jack, when they were in the cozy cabin of the *Tartar,* and he and his sister, with the others, were bending over the charts.

"It's like this," Jack went on, pointing with a pencil to where Porto Rico was shown, in shape and proportion not unlike a building brick. "Our folks started for Guadeloupe—that's here," and he indicated the island which bears not a little resemblance to an hour-glass on the map. Guadeloupe, in fact, consists of two islands, separated by a narrow arm of the sea—Riviere Salee—which divides it by a channel of from one hundred to four hundred feet in width.

"Whether they arrived is of course open to question," said Jack. "I'm inclined to think they didn't, or we'd have heard from them. The storm came before the ship got anywhere near there. Now, then, I think we shall have to look for them somewhere between Porto Rico and Guadeloupe."

"Why not near St. Kitts?" asked Walter, covering with his finger the little island that is included in the discoveries of Columbus. "That's near

where the two sailors were picked up," Walter went on.

"Yes, I think we ought to go there," agreed Jack. "But it's only one of many possible places where our folks may be. It's going to be a long cruise, I'm afraid."

"Where is Sea Horse Island?" asked Cora, as Inez flashed an appealing look at her.

"Here," replied Jack, indicating a rather lonesome spot in the watery waste, where no other islands showed. "It's about half way between Guadeloupe and Aves, or Bird Island. Speaking sailor fashion, its latitude is about sixteen degrees north of the equator, and the longitude about sixty-two degrees, fifty-one minutes west."

"Oh, don't!" begged Bess. "It reminds me of my school days. I never could tell the difference between latitude and longitude."

"Well, there's where Sea Horse Island is," went on Jack, "and if all had gone well, Mr. Robinson hoped to gather orchids there. Now——" he hesitated.

"And do you think we'll touch near there, Jack?" asked his sister.

"I'm going to try."

"Oh, it is so good of you!" murmured Inez. "Perhaps we can save my father."

"At any rate, they ought to allow you to see him," put in Walter. "Political prisoners aren't

supposed to be kept in solitary confinement. We'll have a try at him, anyhow; eh, Jack?"

"Sure. Well, that's our problem—to search among these islands, and I think we have the very boat to do it."

Indeed the *Tartar* was just what they could have desired. It was a powerful motor boat, and had been in commission only a short time. It could weather a fairly big sea, or a heavy blow. It had a powerful motor, many comforts, and even some luxuries, including a bath room.

The engine was located forward, where there was a sleeping room for the engineer, who could steer from a small pilot house. Or the craft could also be guided from the after deck, which was open.

There was a large enclosed space, variously divided into cabins and staterooms.

A kitchen provided for ample meals, the cooking being done by the exhausted and heated gases from the motor, which also warmed the boat on the few days when the weather was rainy and chilly. When the motor was not running, a gasoline stove could be used.

Adjoining the kitchen was the dining cabin, which had folding seats that could be used for berths when more than could be accommodated in the regular sleeping spaces were aboard.

There were two other cabins, fitted with fold-

ing berths, and the smaller of these was apportioned to Jack and Walter, while the girls took possession of the larger one. In addition, there were ample lockers and spaces for storing away food, and the other things they had brought with them. A considerable supply of gasoline had to be carried, but there were several islands where more could be purchased.

"Isn't it just the dearest boat!" murmured Belle, as she made a tour of it, and had peeped into the engine compartment.

"It is," agreed her sister. "Oh, Cora, wouldn't you just fairly love to run that splendid motor?"

"I would, if I didn't have to start it too often," replied Jack's sister, as she looked at the heavy flywheel, which was now moving about as noiselessly as a shaft of light. The propeller was not in clutch, however.

"It has a self-starter," Joe informed the girls. "It's the smoothest engine I ever handled. No trouble at all."

"Better knock wood," suggested Jack.

"Eh? Knock wood?" asked the engineer, evidently puzzled.

"Oh, Jack means to do that to take away any bad luck that might follow your boast," laughed Cora.

"Oh, I see. But I carry a charm," and Joe

showed a queer black pebble. "I always have it with me."

"One superstition isn't much worse than the other," said Bess, with a laugh. "Now let's get settled. Oh, Cora, did you bring any safety-pins? I meant to get a paper, but——"

"I have them," interrupted Belle. "I fancy we won't have much time to sew buttons on—or room to do it, either," she added, as she squeezed herself into a corner of the tiny stateroom.

Suitcases had been stowed away, the boys had gotten their possessions into what they called "ship-shape" order, and the *Tartar* was soon chugging her way over the blue waters of the bay.

The route was to be around the eastern end of the island, taking the narrow channel between Porto Rico and Vieques, and thus into the Caribbean. St. Croix was to be their first stop, though they did not hope for much news from that Danish possession.

"Why don't you boys do some fishing?" asked Cora, as she and the other girls came from their stateroom, where they had been putting their things to rights. "We won't have much but canned stuff to eat, if you don't," she went on, addressing Jack and Walter, who sat on the open after deck, under an awning that shaded them from the hot December sun.

"That's so, we might," assented Jack. "A nice tarpon now wouldn't go bad."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Walter. "We haven't the outfit for tarpon fishing. If we get some red-snappers, we'll be doing well."

The boys had brought along a fishing outfit, one of the simple sort used in those waters, and as they baited their hooks, Jack said:

"Well, maybe I haven't the rod to catch a tarpon, but I can rig up a line and hook that will do the business, maybe."

Accordingly he picked out what Joe said was a regular shark hook, and, baiting it with a piece of canned meat, tossed it over the side, fastening the line to the rail.

Then Jack forgot about it, for Walter had a bite almost as soon as he cast in, and the two boys were soon pulling in red snappers abundantly enough to insure several meals.

"Why don't you try your hand line," suggested Cora, as she went to where it was tied to the rail. "May be you'll get a bite, Jack."

As she spoke, she felt on the heavy string, and, an instant later, uttered a cry, for it was jerked from her hand with such force as to skin her knuckles, and at the same time she cried:

"Jack! Jack! You've hooked a big shark! Oh, what a monster!"

CHAPTER XIX

CRUISING DAYS

THERE was a sudden rush to see the tiger of the deep, of which Cora had had a glimpse. Walter, who was at the wheel, cried to Joe to steer while he, too, ran to the rail.

"I don't see him," said Bess, as she peered down into the deep, blue water.

"You'll see him in a minute," was Cora's opinion. "He had just taken the hook, I think, and he didn't like it. He'll come into view pretty soon."

Hardly had she spoken, than, while the others were looking at the line, which was now unreeling from a spool on which it was wound, the shark came suddenly to the surface, its big triangular fin appearing first.

"There it is!" cried Cora. "See it, Bess!"

"Oh, the monster! I don't want to look at the horrible thing!" screamed Bess, as she covered her eyes with her hands.

The shark swam close to the motor boat, and then with a threshing of the water, and by wild

leaps and bounds, sought to free himself from the sharp hook. But it had gone in too deep.

"No, you don't, old chap!" cried Jack, as he took hold of the slack of the line.

He regretted it the next instant, for the shark darted away with a speed that made the tough string cut deep into Jack's palm.

"Oh!" he murmured, as he sprang back from the rail.

"Better be careful!" warned Joe. "They're mighty strong."

"Oh, cut him loose!" urged Cora. "Do, Walter! We don't want him aboard here."

"He'd be quite a curiosity," observed Jack's chum, as he helped Cora's brother tie a rag around his cut and bleeding hand. "We could sell the fins to the Chinese for soup, and you might have a fan made from the tail."

"No, thank you! It's too horrible!" and Cora could not repress a shudder as the big fish, once more, made a leap partly out of the water, showing its immense size.

"Whew!" whistled Walter, for this was the first good view he had had of the sea-tiger. "We never can get him aboard, Jack. Better do as Cora says, and let him go."

"Oh, I didn't intend to have him as a pet," was the rueful answer of Jack. "I just wanted to see if I could catch one. I'm satisfied to let

him go," and he looked down at his bandaged hand.

"Too bad to lose all that good line," mused Walter, "but we probably won't want to do any more shark-fishing, so I'll cut it."

"I've seen enough of sharks," murmured Belle, who, with Inez, had taken one glance, and then retreated to the cabin.

"These aren't regular man-eating sharks," affirmed Jack, after Walter, with a blow from a heavy knife, had severed the line, letting the shark swim away with the hook.

"Ah, but zey are, Senor!" exclaimed the Spanish girl. "You should hear the stories the natives tell of them."

"But I saw a bigger one not far from the harbor," insisted Jack, "and it seemed almost tame."

"They are, near harbors," explained Cora. "One of the ladies at the hotel explained about that. The harbor sharks live on what they get near shore, stuff thrown overboard from boats, and they grow very large and lazy. But, farther out to sea, they don't get so much to eat, and they'll take a hook and bait almost as soon as it's thrown into the water. The men sometimes go shark-fishing for sport."

"It might be sport, under the right circumstances," said Jack, with a rueful laugh. "Next

time I'll know better than to handle a shark line without gloves."

"So shall I," agreed Cora, as she looked at her skinned knuckles.

They had made a good catch of food fishes, and the boys now proceeded to get these ready for their first meal aboard, the girls agreeing to cook them, and to set the table.

The meal was rather a merry one, in spite of the grief that hung over the party—a grief occasioned by the fear of what might have befallen Mrs. Kimball, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Robinson.

And yet, with all their sorrow, there was that never-failing ray of hope. Without it, the days would have been dismal indeed.

Joe ran the boat while the others were eating, and presently he called into the dining compartment.

"Cape San Juan!" was his announcement.

"Have we sighted it?" asked Jack, referring to the northeasternmost point of Porto Rico.

"Just ahead of us," replied Joe, who was a skillful navigator of the West Indian waters. "You said you were going to change the course there."

"Oh, yes. We'll round the cape and go south, I think," went on Jack. "A little more of that red snapper, Cora. Whoever cooked it knew

how to do it," and he looked at Bess, while the others laughed.

"What's the joke?" Jack demanded, as he ate on, seemingly unperturbed, though his cut hand made it rather awkward to handle his knife and fork.

"Honor to whom honor is due," quoted Cora. "It was Inez who cooked the fish. It's in Spanish style."

"Good!" exclaimed Jack, as he flashed another look at Bess, with whom he seemed to have some understanding. "Whatever style it is, I'm for it. I don't care whether it has gores down the side, and plaits up the middle, with frills around the ruffles, or whatever you call them—it's good."

The others laughed, while Inez looked very much puzzled at Jack's juggling of dressmaking terms.

"Is it zat I have put too much paprika on ze fish?" asked the Spanish girl.

"No, Jack is just trying to be—funny," explained Cora. "He thinks it's great—don't you, Jack?"

"What, to be funny?"

"No, to eat the fish," said Walter.

There was more laughter. Little enough cause for it, perhaps, and yet there seemed to come a sudden relaxation of the strain under which they

had all been laboring the last few days, and even a slight excuse for merriment was welcomed.

So the meal went on, and a good one it was. The motor girls, from having gone on many outings, and from having done much camping, were able to cook to satisfy even the sea-ravenous appetites of two young men, although Jack was not exactly "up to the mark."

Then, too, the novelty of shifting for themselves, after being used to the rather indolent luxury of a tropical hotel, made a welcome change to them. Joe had his meal after the others had finished, as it was necessary for some one to stay at the wheel, for the *Tartar* was slipping along through the blue water at a good rate of speed.

Cape San Juan was rounded, and then the prow of the powerful motor boat was turned south, to navigate the often perilous passage between Porto Rico and Vieques.

"Do you think we'll find any news at St. Croix?" asked Cora, of Jack, in a low voice, when, after the meal, they found themselves for the moment by themselves.

"Hard to say, Sis," he answered. "I'm always living in hope, you know."

"Yes, I suppose we must hope, Jack. And yet, when I think of all they may be suffering—starving, perhaps, on some uninhabited island, it —it makes me—shiver," and Cora glanced appre-

hensively across the stretch of blue water as though she might, at any moment, sight the lonely isle that served as a refuge for her mother, and for Mr. and Mrs. Robinson.

"Don't think about it," advised the practical Jack. "There are just as many chances that the folks have been picked up, and taken to some good island, as that they're on some bad one."

By the course they had laid, it was rather more than a hundred miles from San Juan harbor to St. Croix, the Danish island, and as they were going to make a careful search, and husband their supply of gasoline as much as possible, they had set their average speed at ten miles an hour.

"That will bring us to St. Croix early this evening," said Jack, for they had started in the morning. "We'll stay there all night, for I don't much fancy motoring after dark in unknown waters."

"Neither do I," said Cora.

"And then there are the—sharks!" murmured Belle.

"I won't let them get you!" said Walter, in such soothing tones as one might use to a child. "The bad sharks sha'n't get little Belle," and he pretended to slip an arm about her.

"Stop it!" commanded the blonde twin, with a deep blush as she fairly "squirmed" out of reach.

CHAPTER XX

ANXIOUS NIGHTS

Dusk had begun to settle over the harbor of Christianstad, or Bassin, as the capital of St. Croix is locally known, when the anchor of the *Tartar* was dropped into the mud. The boat had threaded its way through a rather treacherous channel, caused by the then shallow parts of the basin, and had come to rest not far from shore.

"What's the program?" asked Walter, as the motor ceased its throbbing.

"We'll go ashore," said Jack, "and see what news we can learn. I'm not very hopeful, but we may pick up something."

"Back here to sleep?" Walter went on, questioningly.

"Oh, sure. We want to start early in the morning. And from now on, we'll have plenty of stopping places, for there are many small islands where survivors from the wreck might have landed."

"Is there anything to see here ashore?" asked

Bess. "If there is, you might take us girls. We don't want to be left alone."

"Well, I suppose it could be done," Jack assented. "Only we'll have to do it in two trips, for the small boat won't hold us all. Too risky, and there might be—sharks here, Bess," and he made a motion toward the waters of the harbor.

"Oh, how horrible!" she screamed.

A small rowboat was carried as part of the equipment of the *Tartar,* but, at best, it could hold only four. However, the boys and girls were saved the necessity of making two trips from the motor boat to shore, for a large launch, the pilot of which scented business, put out to them from the landing wharf, and soon bargained to land them, and bring them off again when they desired to come. Joe would stay aboard the *Tartar.*

The travelers found Christianstad to be a picturesque town, and in certain parts of it there were many old buildings. The Danish governor was "in residence" then, and affairs were rather more lively than usual.

"What's that queer smell?" asked Cora, as they were on their way to the best hotel in the place, for there they intended making their inquiries.

"Sugar factory," answered Jack. "It's about all the business done here—making sugar."

"How'd you know?" asked Belle.

"Oh, ask Little Willie whenever you want to know anything," laughed Jack. "Listen, my children!

"St. Croix is twenty-two miles long, and from one to six miles in width. It is inhabited by whites and blacks, the former sugar planters, and the latter un-planters—that is, they gather the sugar cane.

"St. Croix was discovered by Columbus in 1493, and at times the Dutch, British and Spanish owned it. In 1733 Denmark bought it, and has owned it since. The average temperature is——"

"That'll do you!" interrupted Walter. "We can read a guide book as well as you can. Come again, Jack."

"Well, I thought you'd be wanting to know something about it, so I primed myself," chuckled Jack.

Curious eyes regarded our friends as they reached the hotel. Walter and Jack left the girls in the parlor while they, themselves, went to make inquiries at the office. And more curious were the looks, when it became known that Jack and the others were seeking traces of those wrecked on the *Romona*.

Curious looks, indeed, were about all the satisfaction that was had. For no news—not the most

vague rumor—had come in regarding the ill-fated vessel. The wreck had not even been heard of, for news from the outside world sometimes filtered slowly to St. Croix.

"Well, that's our first failure," announced Jack, as, with Walter, he rejoined the girls. "We must expect that. If we found them at our first call, it would be too much like a story in a book. We have a long search ahead of us, I'm thinking."

"That's right," agreed Walter. "But, Jack, if this island is twenty-two miles long, might not the refugees have come ashore somewhere else than on this particular part of the coast?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But, if they did, they'd know enough to make their way to civilization by this time. It's over a week since the hurricane."

"I know. But suppose they couldn't make their way—if they were hurt, or something like that?"

"That's so," was the hesitating answer. "Well, we might make a circuit of the island to-morrow."

"Oh, let's do it—by all means!" exclaimed Cora, catching at any stray straw of hope. "We—we might find them—Jack!"

"All right, Sis!" he agreed.

"You look tired," she said to him, as they sat in a little refreshment room, for Walter had of-

fered to "stand treat" to such as there was to be had.

"I am a bit tuckered out," confessed Jack, putting his hand to his head. "It was quite a strain, getting things ready for the start. But, now we're at sea, I'm going to take a good rest—that is, as much as I can, under the circumstances."

"You mustn't overdo it," cautioned Cora. "Remember that we came down here for your health, but we didn't expect to have such a time of it. Poor little mother!" she sighed. "I wonder where she is to-night?"

"I'd like to know," said Jack, softly, and again his hand went to his head with a puzzled sort of gesture.

"Does it ache?" asked Cora, solicitously.

"No, not exactly," answered Jack slowly, uncertainly.

They finished their little refreshment, being about the only stranger-guests at the hotel, and then went out to veiw what they could of the town by lamp-light. Some of the shops displayed wares that, under other circumstances, would have been attractive to the girls, but now they did not feel like purchasing. They were under too much of a strain.

"Well, no news is good news," quoted Walter.

Alas! how often has that been said as a last resort to buoy up a sinking hope. No one else

spoke, as they made their way to the dock where the little ferry boat awaited them.

"What's the matter, Jack?" asked Walter, as he sat beside his chum on the return trip.

"Matter! What do you mean?"

"You're so quiet."

"He doesn't fell well," put in Cora.

"Oh, I'm all right!" insisted Jack, with brotherly brusqueness. "Let me alone!"

"Well, this place seems nice and cozy," commented Belle, as they reached the *Tartar,* and stepped into the cabin, which Joe had illuminated from the incandescents, operated by a storage battery when the motor was not whirling the magneto.

"Yes, it is almost like—home," said Bess, softly.

Jack and Walter looked carefully to the anchor rope, for though the harbor was a safe one, there were muddy flats in places, and while there was no wind at present to drag them, it might spring up in the night.

"Might as well turn in, I guess," suggested Jack, with a weary yawn.

"Why—yes—old man—if you—feel that—way—about it!" mocked Walter, pretending to gape.

"Oh, cut it out!" and Jack's voice was almost snarling. Cora looked at him in some surprise,

and, catching Walter's eye, made him a signal not to take any notice.

Walter nodded in acquiescence, and the incident passed.

As an anchor light was hoisted, and as there was no need for any particular caution, no watch was kept, every one retiring by eleven o'clock. Often, when the young people had been on outings together, Cora and her girl friends had had a "giggling-spell" after retiring to their rooms. But now none of them felt like making fun. It was rather a solemn little party aboard the *Tartar*.

The hope and plan of the young travelers to leave early in the morning, and make a circuit of the island, for a possible sight of the refugees, was not destined to be carried out. For somewhere around two o'clock, when bodily functions are said to be at their lowest ebb, Walter heard Jack calling to him.

"I say, old man, I wish you would come here. Something's the matter with me," came in a hoarse whisper.

"Eh? What's that? Something the matter?" murmured Walter, sleepily.

"Yes, I feel—pretty rocky," was Jack's answer. "Would you mind getting me a little of that nerve stuff the doctor put up for me? It might quiet me so I could go to sleep."

"Great Scott, man! Haven't you been asleep yet?"

"No," was Jack's miserable answer. "I've just been lying here on my back, staring up at the darkness, and now I'm seeing things."

"Seeing things!" faltered Walter.

"Yes, blue centipedes and red sharks. It's like the time I keeled over at college, you know."

"Ugh!" half grunted Walter, with no very cheerful heart, for the prospect before him, if Jack were to be ill. Jack was far from well, when the lights were turned aglow, and Cora came in to see him. It seemed to be a return of his old malady, brought on by an excess of work and worry.

There was little sleep for any of them the rest of the night, for Cora insisted upon sitting up to look after Jack, and Walter made himself up a bunk in the dining compartment, being ready on call.

Toward morning Cora's brother sank into an uneasy slumber under the influence of a sedative, but he awoke at seven o'clock and seemed feverish.

"We must have a doctor from the island," decided Cora, as she saw her brother's condition. "We can't take any chances."

The Danish physician who came out in the boat heartened them up a little by saying it was

merely a relapse, and that Jack would be much better after a few days' rest.

Just stay here with him, or anchor a little farther out," was his suggestion. " The sea breezes will be the best medicine for him. I can't give him any better. Just let him rest until he gets back his nerve."

This advice they followed. But there were anxious nights, and for three of them Walter and Cora divided the task of sitting up with Jack. Joe generously offered to do his share, as did Bess, Belle and Inez, but Cora would not let them relieve her.

So they lingered off the coast of St. Croix until the fever left Jack, departing from his weakened body, but making his mind at rest. Then he began to mend.

CHAPTER XXI

A STRANGE TALE

"WELL, Sis, I don't see what's to keep us here any longer. We might as well get under way again."

"Do you really feel equal to it, Jack?"

"Surely," and the heir of the Kimball family rose from the deck chair and stretched himself. The paleness of his cheeks for the past week was beginning to give way again to the faint glow of health.

"Sorry to get myself knocked out in that fashion," apologized Jack.

"You couldn't help it, old man," said Walter, sympathetically. "The rest has done you good, anyhow."

"Yes, I guess I needed it," confessed Jack. "All my nerves seemed to be on the raw edge."

There was no need for him to admit this, since it had been very evident since reaching St. Croix. The Danish physician had given good advice, and now Jack was even better than when he received the news of the foundering of the *Romona*.

The balmy sea breezes, the lack of necessity for any hard work, the ministrations of Cora, and, occasionally, the other girls, set Jack in a fair way to recovery. Inez Ralcanto made many dainty Spanish dishes for the invalid, from the stock of provisions aboard the *Tartar,* and with what she could get from the island. Nothing gave her more delight than to know that Jack had gone to the bottom of each receptacle in which she served her concoctions.

"It is so good to see you smile again, Senor Jack," she said to him, as she looked at him, on deck.

"And it's good to smile again, Inez," he said to her.

"You'd better look out, Bess," warned Walter. "First thing you know, she'll cut you out."

"Silly!" was all the answer Bess vouchsafed. But there was a tell-tale blush on her cheeks.

The anchor of the *Tartar* was hoisted, and once more she sailed away, this time on the cruise about St. Croix. That it would result in any news of the lost ones being obtained no one really believed, but they felt that no chance, not even the slightest, should be overlooked.

So they motored around the Danish island, stopping at little bays or inlets where it seemed likely a raft or boat from a shipwrecked vessel might most likely put in. They found no traces,

however, and what few natives they were able to converse with had heard of no refugees coming ashore.

"Where next?" asked Walter, when they had completed the circuit of St. Croix, and come to anchor once more off Christianstad, to lay aboard some supplies.

"St. Kitts," decided Jack, who was again able to take his part in the councils. "At least we'll head for there, and stop at any little two-by-four islands we pick up on the way. Isn't that your opinion, Cora?"

"Yes, Jack. Anything to find those for whom we are looking. Oh, I wonder if we shall ever find them?"

"Of course!" said Jack quickly, but, even as he spoke, he wondered if he were not deceiving himself. For when all was said and done, it seemed such a remote hope—and might be so long deferred, as, not only to make the heart sick, but to stop it's beating altogether. It was such a very slender thread that the beads of hope were strung on—it was so easy to snap. And yet they hoped on!

From St. Croix to St. Kitts is about one hundred and twenty miles, measured on the most accurate charts, and while it could have easily been made in a day's sail by the *Tartar,* it was decided not to try for any time limit, but to

cruise back and forth toward it in rather zig-zag fashion.

"For that's the only way we'll have of picking up any small islands that might possibly be uncharted," explained Jack. "Most of the coral reefs here are noted on the maps, but there's a bare chance that we might strike an unknown one, or an island, that would serve as a haven of refuge for shipwrecked ones."

His friends agreed with him, and Joe said it was probably the best plan that could be adopted.

So they were once more under way.

It was near St. Kitts that the two sailors from the *Romona* had been picked up, to tell their story of the stressful hurricane and mutiny. And, other things being equal, as Jack put it, it was near St. Kitts that some news might be expected to be had of those for whom the search was being made.

As the capital, Basseterre, was a town of more than ten thousand population, it might reasonably be expected that some news of the foundering of the *Romona* would be received there. It was in that vicinity, as was evident from the rescue of the two sailors, that the ship had been torn by the wind and waves.

A week was occupied in making the journey to St. Kitts from St. Croix, a week of cruising back

and forth, and of stopping at many mere dots of islands. Some of these were seen at once to be not worth searching, since their entire extent could almost be seen at a single glance. They were merely collections of coral rocks, submerged at high water. Others were larger, and these were visited in the small boat which the *Tartar* carried with her.

It was on some of these trips, over comparatively shallow water, that the beauties and mysteries of the ocean bottom were made plain to our friends.

Joe, the engineer, made for them a "water glass," by the simple process of knocking the bottom out of a pail, and putting in puttied glass, instead. This, when put into the water, glass side somewhat below the surface, enabled one to see with startling clearness the bottom of the ocean, in depths from seventy-five to one hundred feet.

Most wonderful was the sight.

"Why, it looks like a forest, or a wonderful green-house down there," said Cora, after her first view.

"Those are the coral and the sponges," explained Joe. Our friends were surprised to see that coral, instead of being stiff and hard, as it had seemed to them when they handled specimens of it on land, was, under the water, as graceful

and waving as the leaves of palm trees in a gentle wind. The ocean currents waved and undulated it, until it seemed alive.

Branch coral they saw, like miniature trees, and great " fans," some nearly ten feet across. Then there were great rocks of the coral—living rocks, formed of millions and millions of the bodies of the polyps, insects who build up such marvelous formations.

Sponges there were, too, though not in great enough abundance to warrant the sponge-gathering fleets coming to this section.

Through the water glass, our friends could see fish swimming around under the water, darting here and there between the waving coral and under the growing sponges.

It was all very wonderful and beautiful, but it is doubtful if any of the young people really appreciated it as they might have done, had their hearts been lighter. Inez did not care to look at the sea sights, for she said she had seen them too often as a child in the islands.

In spite of her anxiety concerning her father and his possible fate, she did not obtrude her desires on her friends. She seldom spoke of the hope she had of going to Sea Horse Island, either to help rescue her father, or to learn some news of him, so that others might set him free.

" But we'll go there, just the same! " Jack had

said. "And if we can get him out of prison, we will. There must be some sort of authority there to appeal to."

"You are very good, Senor Jack," whispered Inez, with a grateful look.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Jack, who did not like praise.

They reached St. Kitts, or St. Christopher, as it is often called, from the immortal Columbus who found it in 1493, when he did so much to bring unknown lands to notice.

"Now we'll see what sort of luck we'll have," spoke Walter.

They anchored off Basseterre, and, going ashore, had little difficulty in confirming the story of the two shipwrecked sailors being picked up. That much was current news, since another vessel than the *Boldero* had been near, when the latter's captain stopped for the two unfortunates.

That was all that really was learned, save that some fishing boats, later, had seen pieces of wreckage.

Diligent inquiry in Old Road, and Sandy Point, the two other principal towns, failed to gain further information, and our friends were considering continuing their cruise, when, most unexpectedly, they heard a curious tale that set them, eventually, on the right course.

They were coming down to the dock, one even-

ing, to take a boat out to their own craft, when an aged colored man, who spoke fairly good English, accosted them. At first Jack took him for a beggar, and gruffly ordered him away, but the fellow insisted.

"I've got news for you, boss," he said, with a curious British cockney accent. "You lookin' for shipwrecked parties, ain't you?"

"Yes," said Jack, a bit shortly. But that was common news.

"Well, there's an island about fifty miles from here," the black went on, "and there's somethin' bloomin' stringe about it;" for so he pronounced "strange."

"Strange—what do you mean?" asked Walter.

"Just what I says, boss, stringe. If you was to say it'd be worth arf a crown now——"

"Oh, I haven't time to bother with curiosities!" exclaimed Jack, impatiently.

"Let us hear his story, Jack," insisted Cora. "What is it?" she asked, giving him a coin, though not as much as he had asked for.

"Thank ye kindly, Miss. It's this way," said the colored Englishman. "I works on a fishin' boat, and a few days ago, comin' back, we sighted this island. We needed water, and we went ashore to get it, but—well, we comes away without it."

"Why was that?" asked Walter, curiously.

"Because, boss, there's a strange creature on

that island, that's what there is," said the negro. "He scared all of us stiff. He was all in rags and tatters, and when he found we was sheerin' off, without coming ashore, he went wild, and flung his cap at us. It floated off shore, and I picked it up, bein' on that side of the boat."

"But how does this concern us?" asked Jack, rousing a little.

"I could show you that cap, boss," the negro went on. "I've got it here. It's dark, but maybe you can make out the letters on it. I can't read very good."

Jack held the cap up in the gleam of a light on the water-front. His startled eyes saw a cap, such as sailors wear, while in faded gilt letters on the band was the name:

ROMONA

CHAPTER XXII

THE LONELY ISLAND

WALTER, looking over Jack's shoulder, rubbed his eyes, as though to clear them from a mist, and then, as he saw the faded gilt letters, he closed both eyes, opening them again quickly to make sure of a perfect vision.

"Jack!" he murmured. "Do I really see it?"

"I—I guess so," was the faltering answer. "Cora, look here!"

The girls, who had drawn a little aside at the close approach of the negro, came up by twos, Cora and Belle walking together.

"What is it?" asked Jack's sister, thinking perhaps the man had made a second charity appeal to her brother, and that he wanted her advice on it.

"Look," said Jack simply, and he extended the cap.

As Walter had done, Cora was at first unable to believe the word she saw there.

"The—*Romona,*" she faltered.

"The steamer mother and father sailed on?"

asked Belle, her face pale in the lamp-light.

"The same name, at any rate," remarked Walter, in a low voice. "And there would hardly be two alike in these waters."

"But what does it mean? Where did he get the cap?" asked Cora, her voice rising with her excitement. "Tell me, Jack!"

"He says it was flung to him by some sort of an insane sailor, I take it, on a lonely island."

"That's it, Missie," broke in the man, his tone sufficiently respectful. "Me and my mates, as I was tellin' the boss here," and he nodded at Jack, "started to fill our water casks, but we didn't stay to do it arter we saw this chap. Fair a wild man, I'd call 'im, Missie. That's what I would. Fair a wild man!"

"And he flung you this cap?"

"That's what he done, Missie. Chucked it right into the sea, Missie, jest like it didn't cost nothin', and it was a good cap once."

It was not now, whatever it had been, for it bore evidence of long sea immersion, and the band had been broken and cracked by the manner in which the negro fisherman had crammed it into his pocket.

"Jack!" exclaimed Cora, in a strangely agitated voice. "We must hear more of this story. It may be—it may be a clue!"

"That's what I'm thinking."

A little knot of idlers had gathered at seeing the negro talking to the group of white young people, and Walter and Jack, exchanging glances, mutually decided that the rest of the affair might better be concluded in seclusion. Jack gave the negro a hasty but comprehensive glance.

"Shall we take him aboard, Cora?" he asked his sister. Jack was very willing to defer to Cora's opinion, for he had, more than once, found her judgment sound. And, in a great measure, this was her affair, since she had been invited first by the Robinsons, and Jack himself was only a sort of accidental after-thought.

"I think it would be better to take him to the *Tartar,*" Cora said. "We can question him there, and, if necessary, we can——"

She hesitated, and Jack asked:

"Well, what? Go on!"

"No, I want to think about it first," she made reply. "Wait until we girls hear his story."

"Will you come to our motor boat?" asked Jack of the sailor, who said he was known by the name of Slim Jim, which title, indeed, as far as his physical characteristics were concerned, fitted him perfectly. He was indeed slim, though of rather a pleasant cast of features.

"Sure, boss, I'll go," he answered. "Of course I might git a job by hangin' around here, but——"

"Oh, we'll pay you for your time—you won't

lose anything," Jack interrupted. Indeed the man had, from the first, it seemed, accosted him with the idea of getting a little "spare change," for, like most of the negro population of the Antilles, he was very poor.

"But what's it all about?" asked Bess, who had not heard all the talk, and who, in consequence, had not followed the significance of the encounter.

"Zey have found a man, who says a sailor on some island near here, wore a cap with ze name of your mozer's steamer," put in Inez, who, with the quickness of her race, had gathered those important facts.

"Oh!" gasped Bess.

"Don't build too much on it," interposed Jack. "It may be—only a sailor's yarn."

"It's all true, what I'm tellin' you, boss!" exclaimed the negro.

"Oh, I don't doubt your word," said Jack, quickly. "But let's get aboard the boat, before we talk any further."

Aboard the *Tartar,* seated in her cozy cabin, the story of Slim Jim seemed to take on added significance. He told it, too, with a due regard for its importance—especially to him—in the matter of what money it might bring to him.

In brief, his "yarn" was about as I have indicated, in the brief talk with Jack. Jim and his

mates had been on a protracted fishing trip, and had run short of water. One of the number knew of a lonely and uninhabited island near where they were then cruising—an island that contained a spring of good water.

They were headed for the place, but when they were about to land, they had been alarmed by the appearance of what at first was supposed to be some wild beast.

"He crawled on all fours, Missie," said Slim Jim, addressing Cora with such earnestness that she could not repress a shiver. "He crawled on all fours like some bloomin' beastie, begging your pardon, Missie. We was all fair scared, an' sheered orf."

"Then how did you get the cap?" asked Walter.

"He chucked the blessed cap to us, sir!" Jim appeared to have a different appellation for each member of the party. "Chucked it right into the water, sir. I picked it up."

"What else did he do?" asked Cora.

"He behaved somethin' queer, Missie. Runnin' up and down, now on four legs—meanin' his hands, Missie—and now on two. Fair nutty I'd call him."

"Poor fellow," murmured Bess.

"And is that all that happened?" demanded Walter.

"Well, about all, sir. I picked up the cap, and we rowed away. We thought we'd better go dry, sir, in the manner of speakin', instead of facin' that chap. He was fair crazy, sir."

"Did he look like a sailor?" Jack wanted to know.

"Well, no, boss, you couldn't rightly say so, boss. He took on somethin' terrible when we sheered off an' left 'im."

"And that's all?" inquired Belle, in a low voice.

"Yes—er—little lady," answered Slim Jim, finding a new title for fair Belle. "That's all, little lady, 'cept that I kept th' cap, not thinkin' much about it, until I heard you gentlemen inquirin' for news of the *Romona*. I heard some one spell out that there name in these letters for me," and he indicated the name on the cap. "Then I spoke to you, boss."

"Yes, and I'm glad you did," said Jack.

"Why?" began Cora. "Do you think——"

"I think it's barely possible that one of the sailors from the *Romona* is marooned on that lonely island," interrupted Jack. "He may be the only one, or there may be—more. We'll have to find out. Can you take us to this island?" he asked Slim Jim.

"The lonely island?"

"Yes."

"I reckon so, boss, if you was to hire me, in the manner of speakin'."

"Of course."

"Then I'll go."

"Off for the lonely isle," murmured Cora, softly. "I wonder what we'll find there?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LONELY SAILOR

ONCE more the *Tartar* was off on her strange cruise. This time she carried an added passenger, or, rather a second member of the crew, for Slim Jim bunked with Joe, and was made assistant engineer, since the negro proved to know something of gasoline motors.

After hearing the story told by the colored fisherman, and confirming it by inquiries in St. Kitts, Jack, Cora and the others decided that there was but one thing to do. That was to head at once for the lonely island where the sailor, probably maddened by his loneliness and hardship, was marooned.

As to the location of the island, Slim Jim could give a fair idea as to where it rose sullenly from the sea, a mass of coral rock, with a little vegetation. The truth of this was also established by cautious inquiries before the *Tartar* tripped her anchor.

Lonely Island, as they called it, was about a day's run from St. Kitts in fair weather, and now,

though the weather had taken a little turn, as though indicating another storm, it was fair enough to warrant the try.

More gasoline was put aboard, with additional stores, for Slim Jim, in spite of his attenuation, was a hearty eater. Then they were on their way.

Aside from a slight excitement, caused when Walter hooked a big fish, and was nearly taken overboard by it—being in fact pulled back just in time by Bess, little of moment occurred on the trip to Lonely Island.

Toward evening, after a day's hard pushing of the *Tartar*, Slim Jim, who had taken his position in the bows, called out:

"There she lies, boss!"

"Lonely Island?" asked Jack.

"That's her."

"Since you've been there, where had we better anchor?" asked Joe, with a due regard for the craft he was piloting.

"Around on the other side is a good bay, with deep enough water, and good holding ground," said the negro. "If it comes on to blow, an' it looks as if it might, we'll ride easy there."

Accordingly, they passed by the place where the negro fishermen had been frightened away with their empty water casks, and made for the other side of the island. Recalling the story of the

queer and probably crazed man, Jack and the others, including Slim Jim, gazed eagerly for a sight of him. But the island seemed deserted and lonely.

"What if he shouldn't be there?" whispered Belle to Cora.

"Don't suggest it, my dear. It's the best chance we've yet had of finding them, and it mustn't fail—it simply mustn't!"

It was very quiet in the little bay where they dropped anchor, though a flock of birds, with harsh cries, flew from the palm trees at the sound of the "mud hook" splashing into the water.

"Now for the sailor!" exclaimed Walter.

"Hush! He'll hear you," cautioned Belle.

"Well, we want him to, don't we?" and he smiled at her.

Eagerly they gazed toward shore, but there was no sign of a human being around there. Lonely indeed was the little island in the midst of that blue sea, over which the setting sun cast golden shadows.

"Are you going ashore?" asked Walter of Jack, in a low voice. Somehow it seemed necessary to speak in hushed tones in that silent place.

"Indeed we're not—until morning!" put in Cora. "And don't you boys dare go and leave us alone," and she grasped her brother's arm in a determined clasp.

"I guess it will be better to wait until morning," agreed Jack.

Supper—or dinner, as you prefer—was served aboard, and then the searchers sat about and talked of the strange turn of events, while Jim and Joe, in the motor compartment, tinkered with the engine, which had not been running as smoothly, of late, as could be desired.

"I hope it doesn't go back on us," remarked Jack, half dubiously.

"Don't suggest such a thing," exclaimed his sister.

They agreed to go ashore in the morning, and search for the marooned sailor supposed to be on Lonely Island. The night passed quietly, though there were strange noises from the direction of the island. Jack, and the others aboard the *Tartar,* which swung at anchor in the little coral encircled lagoon, said they were the noises of birds in the palm trees. But Slim Jim shook his head.

"That crazy sailor makes queer noises," he said.

"If he's there," suggested Walter.

In the morning they found him, after a short search. It was not at all difficult, for they came upon the unfortunate man in a clump of trees, under which he was huddled, eating something in almost animal fashion.

With Jack and Walter in the lead, the girls be-

hind them, and Joe and Jim in the rear, they had set off on their man-hunt. They had not gone far from the shore before an agitation in the bushes just ahead of them attracted the attention of the two boys.

"Didn't you see something?" asked Walter.

"Something—yes," admitted Jack. "A bird, I think."

"But I didn't hear the flutter of wings."

"I don't know as to that. Anyhow, there are birds enough here. Come on."

They glanced back to where Bess had stopped to look at a beautiful orchid, in shape itself not unlike some bird of most brilliant plumage.

"Oh, if father could only see that!" she sighed. "It is too beautiful to pick."

Cora and her chums closed up to the boys, and then, as they made their way down a little grassy hill, into a sort of glade, Cora uttered a sudden and startled cry.

"Look!" she gasped, clutching Jack's arm in such a grip that he winced.

"Where?" he asked.

"Right under those trees."

And there they saw him—the lonely sailor, crouched down, eating something as—yes, as a dog might eat it! So far had he fallen back to the original scale—if ever there was one.

Some one of the party trod on a stick, that broke

with a loud snap—almost like a rifle shot in that stillness. The lone sailor looked up, startled, as a dog might, when disturbed at gnawing a bone. Then he remained as still and quiet as some stone.

"That's him," said the negro sailor, and though he meant to speak softly, his voice seemed fairly to boom out. At the sound of it, the hermit was galvanized into life. He dropped what he had been eating, and slowly rose from his crouching attitude. Then he turned slowly, so as to face the group of intruders on his island fastness. He seemed to fear they would vanish, if he moved too suddenly—vanish as the figment of some dream.

"Poor fellow," murmured Cora. "Speak to him, Jack. Say something."

"I'm afraid of frightening him more. Wait until he wakes up a bit."

"He does act like some one just disturbed from a sleep," spoke Walter. "Maybe you girls——"

"Oh, we're not afraid," put in Bess, quickly. "Not with all this protection, and she looked from the boys to the two sturdy men.

Now the lonely sailor was moving more quickly. He straightened up, more like the likeness and image of man as he was created, and took a step forward. Finding, evidently, that this did not dissipate the images, he passed his hand in front of his face, as though brushing away

unseen cobwebs. Then he fairly ran toward the group.

"Look out!" warned Joe. But there was nothing to fear. When yet a little distance off, the man fell on his knees, and, holding up his hands, in an attitude of supplication cried out in a hoarse voice:

"Don't say you're not real. Oh, dear God, don't let 'em say that! Don't let 'em be visions of a dream! Don't, dear God!"

"Oh, speak to him, Jack!" begged Cora. "He thinks it's a vision. Tell him we are real—that we've come to take him away—to find out about our own dear ones—speak to him!"

There was no need. Her own clear voice had carried to the lonely sailor, and had told him what he wanted to know.

"They speak! I hear them! They are real. And now, dear God, don't let them go away!" he pleaded.

"We're not going away!" Jack called. "At least not until we help you—if we can. Come over here and tell us all about it. Are you from the *Romona?*"

"The *Romona,* yes. But if—if you're from her—if you've come to take me back to her, I'm not going! I'd rather die, first. I won't go back—I won't be a pirate! You sha'n't make me! I'll stay here and die, first!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE REVENUE CUTTER

THE story told by Ben Wrensch—for such proved to be the name of the lonely sailor—cannot be set down as he told it. In the first place, there was little of chronological order about it, and in the second place he was interrupted so often by Cora, or one of the others, asking questions, or he interrupted himself so frequently, that it would be but a disjointed narrative at best. So I have seen fit to abridge it, and tell it in my own way.

As a matter of fact, the questions Cora, her girl chums, or the boys asked, only tended to throw more light on the strange affair, whereas the interruptions of Ben himself were more dramatic. He was so afraid that it was all a dream—that he would awaken from it only to find himself alone again.

"But you are real, aren't you, now?" he would ask, pathetically.

"Of course," said Cora, with a gentle smile.

"And you won't go away and leave me, as the

others did?" he begged, but he did not couple Slim Jim with one of those. In fact, he did not pay much attention to the negro, for which Jim, a rather superstitious chap, was very grateful.

"Certainly we won't leave you here," Jack said. "We'll take you wherever you want to go, Ben."

"That's good. Well, as I was saying——" and then he would resume his interrupted narrative.

So, instead of telling his "yarn" in that fashion, I have sought to save your time and interest by condensing it.

Up to the time of the hurricane, which caught the *Romona* in rather a bad stretch of water, there was nothing that need be set down. The vessel bearing the mother of Jack and Cora, and the parents of the Robinson twins, had gone on her way, until the sudden bursting of the storm, with unusual tropical fury, had thrown the seas against and over the craft with smashing fury. Boats, and parts of the railing and netting, had been carried away, and one or two sailors washed overboard.

Then had come the mutiny, if such it could be called—an uprising of some of the sailors, driven to almost insane anger because of the refusal of the captain to put into a port, the harbor of which could not be made in such a sea as was running, nor in the teeth of such furious wind. The only

thing to do was to scud before the gale, with the engines and crew doing what they could.

There had been an incipient panic, and a rush for the boats quelled hardly in time, for some had been lowered, and swamped and others had gotten away.

There was an exchange of shots between the captain and some of the mutineers, and, as our friends knew, one sailor, at least, was wounded, though whether by the captain or by the mutineers was uncertain.

Ben Wrensch, who appeared of better character than the usual run of West Indian sailors, had his share in the mutiny—that is, he refused to take sides with the small part of the crew who berated the captain for something he could not do. He had sided with the small part of the crew who remained loyal.

"And what did they do to you?" asked Jack. For the man had come to a pause, after describing how many shouted that the ship was foundering.

"The rascals drove me and some of the others to a boat, and lowered us away," was the answer. "They said they didn't want us aboard. I guess they was afraid we'd give evidence against 'em, if we ever got the chance, and so I would."

"And did you land here?" asked Cora, indicating the lonely isle.

"Not at first, Miss. We tossed about in the boat, and the sea got higher and the wind stronger. And how it did rain! It seemed to beat right through your skin. The rain helped to keep the seas down, but not much. It was fearful!"

He then went on to tell how, after laboring hard in the darkness of the night, the boat he was in (five other sailors being his companions) was swamped by a huge wave. He was tossed into the sea, and must have been rendered unconscious by a blow on the head, for he remembered nothing more until he found himself being washed back and forth on the beach by the waves, and at last had understanding and strength enough to crawl up beyond the reach of the water.

So he had come to Lonely Island. And there he had existed ever since.

Some few things—including the cap that had been of such value to our friends—had been washed ashore from the boat, or otherwise Ben might have starved at first, for he was too weak to hunt for food. Gradually he regained the power to help himself.

He found mussels clinging to the rocks, he gathered some turtles' eggs, and was lucky enough to kill a bird with a stone. On such food he lived. For shelter he made himself a hut of bark and vines, and so the days passed in loneliness.

It had not taken him long to find that he was

the only inhabitant of Lonely Island. He alone, of the company in the boat, had come ashore to be saved.

Of the time he spent on the island you would not be interested to hear. One day was like another, save as he had better or worse luck in providing food. His great anxiety was to be taken off and to this end he made a signal, but it was a small one, and it is doubtful it would ever have been seen.

Gradually his hardships, his exposure and the loneliness preyed on him until he was well-nigh insane. He became almost like an animal in his fight against nature.

He was on the verge of madness when he saw the boat load of fishermen approaching for water, and it was his queer actions that drove them off. In his despair he threw his cap at them, the most fortunate thing he could have done.

"And now you come to me," he said, simply.

"Yes, we're here," admitted Jack. "But can you give us any more news of the *Romona?* That is what we want to know. Which way was she headed when you were forced to leave her? Have you any idea where she is now?"

"She was headed southeast," was the answer.

"And how long would you say she could keep afloat?" Walter wanted to know.

"She ought to be afloat now!" was the startling reply.

"Now!" cried Jack. "What do you mean?"

"Why, she was in no danger of sinking," Ben went on, and Cora and the girls felt new hope springing up in their hearts.

"Are you sure of this?" demanded Jack.

"Very sure; yes. I was below, just before I was forced into the small boat, and there wasn't a plate sprung. The engines were in good order, and if the mutineers hadn't raised a hue and cry, everything would have been all right. But they wanted their way, for their own ends, I fancy."

"Meaning what?" asked Jack.

"That they were glad of any excuse to seize the ship. I overheard some of their plans. They would have done it, storm or no storm. There was a plot to take the *Romona,* put off all who would be in the way, take her to some port, change her name and engage her in what amounted to piracy."

"The plotters were going to do this?" cried Walter, aghast.

"Yes, and the storm only egged them on. It was their opportunity."

"Then the *Romona* may be afloat now?" demanded Cora.

"She very likely is, Miss, I should say. A little

damaged, perhaps, but not more than could be fixed."

"And what of the passengers?" asked Bess.

"Well, they're either aboard her, as prisoners, or have thrown their lot in with the mutineers, or——"

He did not go on.

"Well?" asked Jack, grimly.

"Or they were put adrift, as I was," went on Ben.

"But you did not see that happen?" asked Cora, for the story was nearing its end now.

"No, Miss, I didn't see that. When I was put overboard, all the passengers—and there weren't many of them—were still aboard."

"Did you see any of them?" asked Bess.

"Oh, yes, Miss. All of 'em, I fancy."

"My father and mother——"

Ben described, as well as he could, the various characteristics and appearances of the *Romona's* passengers, and Mrs. Kimball and Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were easily recognized.

"Then we must still keep on searching for them," decided Jack, at the conclusion of the narrative. "We'll just have to keep on!"

"It looks so," admitted Cora.

"Oh, we mustn't *think* of giving up!" cried Bess. "I know my father. He just wouldn't give in to those horrid mutineers, and he wouldn't

throw in his fortunes with them, either. I can't explain it, but, somehow I feel more hopeful than at any time yet, that they are all right—papa and mamma, and your mother, too, Cora."

"I am glad you think so, dear. I haven't given up either. But let's get away from here, Jack."

"That's what I say!" murmured Belle, with a little nervous shiver. "This place gives me such a—creepy feeling."

"You might well say so, Miss," put in Ben. "That is, if you had to stay here all along, as I did, with nothing but them parrot birds screeching at you all day long. It was—awful!"

There was no use in staying longer on Lonely Island, and Ben Wrensch was only too glad to be taken from it. At first the motor girls talked of taking him with them, on the remainder of the cruise, but, as Jack pointed out, there was no need of this.

He could give no further information as to the location of the *Romona,* providing the steamer still was afloat. And he would only be an added, and comparatively useless, passenger. He was not exactly the sort of personage one would desire in the rather cramped quarters of the *Tartar,* though he was kind and obliging. He would be better off ashore, for the time being, where he could get medical treatment.

So the big motor boat swept out of the blue

lagoon, and headed for St. Kitts, for it was planned to leave Ben, and once more take up the search.

They had not been under way more than an hour, however, before Jack, who was steering, uttered a cry.

"There's a boat coming toward us," he said. "She seems to be a small launch."

"Yes, and she's signalling to us!" added Walter. "She wants to speak to us!"

Joe came up from the motor room, and looked long and earnestly at the approaching craft.

"That's an English revenue cutter," he said, "and she's in a hurry, too."

"I wonder what she can want with us," mused Jack, as he ordered a signal to be run up on the small mast, indicating that they would speak to the approaching craft.

CHAPTER XXV

NEWS OF THE "ROMONA"

OVER the slowly heaving swell of the blue waters the swift revenue cutter came on. Those aboard the *Tartar* watched her with eager eyes. Did she have some news for them? This was the question in the mind of the motor girls.

"Oh, perhaps they have mother aboard!" breathed Cora, her hopes running thus high.

"And they might have *our* mother and father," added Bess, taking bold heart as she heard Cora speak.

Inez said nothing. It was too much for her to dare to think that her father might be released from his political prison. She could only wait—and hope.

"Some speed to her," observed Jack, admiringly, as he watched the white foam piled up in front of the bow of the oncoming craft.

"But she's not very big," spoke Walter.

"She's built for speed," remarked Engineer Joe. "She doesn't usually come out this far to

sea; just hangs around the harbors, and tries to catch small smugglers. She couldn't stand much of a blow, and it's my opinion we're going to get one."

"Oh, I hope not soon!" exclaimed Cora, with a little nervous glance up at the sky.

"Well, within a day or so," went on Joe. "It's making up for a storm all right, and I guess that cutter is trying to get her job done—whatever it is—and scoot back into harbor."

"But why should she want to speak to us?" asked Bess. "Of course it's interesting, and all that—almost like a story, in fact—but what does she want?"

"Tell you better when she gets here," said Walter with a laugh. "Perhaps there are some ladies aboard, and they want to learn the latest styles from the United States—seeing how recently you girls came from there."

"Silly!" murmured Belle, but it was noticed that she glanced at her brown linen dress, relieved with little touches of flame-colored velvet here and there—in which costume she made a most attractive picture. At least, Walter thought so.

"Perhaps zey are in search of—him," suggested Inez, pointing to Sailor Ben, who was lying on a coil of rope in the bow.

"That's right!" exclaimed Jack, with a look of admiration at the Spanish girl. "They may have

"WHAT BOAT IS THAT?" WAS THE DEMAND.

heard a story of his being on the island, and come out to rescue him. They could tell we came from that direction."

"It's possible," admitted Walter.

Whoever was in charge of the revenue cutter, seeing that their signals to speak the *Tartar* had been observed and answered, cut down the speed somewhat, so that the government vessel came on more slowly. In a short time, however, she was near enough for a hail, through a megaphone, to be heard.

"What boat is that?" was the demand.

"The *Tartar,* from San Juan," was Jack's reply.

"Where bound?"

"It's too long a story to yell this way," was Jack's answer. "Shall we come aboard?"

"No, I'll send a boat," came back. Presently a small boat, containing three men, was lowered, for the sea was very smooth, and in a little while a trim-looking lieutenant was at the accommodation ladder of the *Tartar.*

"Why, it's just like a——play!" murmured Bess, as she saw the sword at the officer's side. "I wonder if he's going to put us all under arrest?"

"Would you mind?" asked Cora.

"I don't know. He has nice eyes, hasn't he?"

"Hopeless!" sighed Cora, with a little smile at her chum.

A quick glance on the part of the lieutenant seemed to give him an idea of the nature of the cruise of the *Tartar*.

"Oh, a pleasure party!" he exclaimed. "I am sorry we had to stop you, but——"

"That's all right," said Cora, for she thought it would be less embarrassing if one of the feminine members gave some assurance. "It doesn't happen to be a pleasure trip."

"No? You astonish me, really! I should say——"

His eyes caught sight of the ragged and unkempt figure of the marooned sailor.

"Has there been a wreck? Did you save some one?" the lieutenant asked, quickly. His practiced eye told him at once that some tragedy had occurred.

"Something like that—yes," Cora assented. "But the rescue is not over yet. My brother will tell you all about it," and she nodded to Jack. The lieutenant, with a courteous lifting of his cap, turned to face Walter's chum.

"We rescued him from a little island back there," Jack said. "We thought you might be on the same errand."

"No," the officer said, "though we would have gone if we had heard of it. But we are after bigger game. Are you going back to St. Kitts?"

"Yes, and then on again. We're trying to find the *Romona,* or some——"

"The *Romona!*" cried the lieutenant, and there was wonder in his tones. "Do you, by any possible chance, mean the *Romona* of the Royal Line?"

"That's the one," said Jack, something of the other's excitement communicating itself to him. "Why, do you know anything about her?"

"I only wish we knew *more* of her!" snapped the lieutenant, with a grim tightening of his lips, while the girls looked on in wonder at the strange scene. "We're after her, too," the officer continued. "She's in the hands of a mutinous crew, and she's been trying to do some smuggling. We've orders to take her if we can, but first we have to find her, and that's the errand we're on now. We stopped you to ask if you had had a sight of her. But why are you interested in finding her, if I may ask?"

"We're looking for my mother, who sailed on her," said Cora, quickly, "and for Mr. and Mrs. Perry Robinson, the parents of these girls," and she nodded toward the twins.

"Is it possible!" exclaimed the lieutenant. "This is indeed a coincidence."

"Have you sighted the *Romona?*" asked Cora.

"No, Miss, and I wish we would—soon,"

spoke the lieutenant. "We're going to have a storm, if I'm any judge, and our cutter isn't any too sea-worthy. But it's all in the line of business," and he shrugged his shapely shoulders as though preparing for the worst. He would not shirk his duty.

"Well, I'm sorry we can't give you any information," Cora said. "We, too, are very anxious to find the steamer, for we are not even sure that our parents are aboard. There was a terrible storm, you know, and she may have foundered."

"No, she did not. We have good evidence of that," was the officer's answer. "She had a hard time in the hurricane, and suffered some damage, Miss, but she's sound and able to navigate. We heard that some of the crew, who would not join with the mutineers, were marooned—I am glad to get confirmation of that," and he nodded at Ben, whose story had been briefly told.

"But what of the passengers?" asked Bess, anxiously. "Oh, did you hear anything of father and mother?"

"Not personally, I am sorry to say," was the answer of the lieutenant as he touched his cap, and smiled at the eager girl.

"But did you hear anything?" asked Cora, for somehow she fancied she detected a tone as though the officer would have been glad to answer no further.

"Well, yes, Miss, I did," was the somewhat reluctant reply. "The story goes that all the passengers are still aboard."

"Still on board!" echoed Jack. "Why, I thought they were also marooned."

"Evidently not," said the lieutenant. "Either the storm must have made them change their plans, or the mutineers were afraid of evidence being given against them by the passengers, for they kept them aboard, according to the latest reports we have had.

"After living through the hurricane, the *Romona* was headed for a quiet harbor, where the smugglers have their headquarters, and there repairs were made. Since then the ship, under another name, has been engaged in running contraband goods. We were ordered to get after her, but, so far, we have had our trouble for our pains. We hoped you might have sighted her."

"We're going to keep on trying," said Cora. "We are going back to St. Kitts, to land him," and she nodded at the sailor they had rescued.

"Well, then we may see you again," the lieutenant said, with a bow, that took in the motor girls impartially. He shot a quick glance at Inez, but Cora did not think it wise to speak of the Spanish girl, nor mention her father.

After some further talk, in the course of which the lieutenant said the mutineers and smugglers

would be harshly dealt with when caught, he returned to the cutter, which was soon under way again. She sheered off on a new tack, while the *Tartar* resumed her journey to St. Kitts.

"Wasn't that remarkable?" asked Bess.

"Very strange," agreed Cora.

"And it gave us news," spoke Belle. "We know now that your mother, Cora, and that our folks are all right."

"All right?" cried Jack, questioningly.

"Well, I mean they are safe on board, and not suffering on some little island," went on Belle.

"They might better be on some island," murmured Jack, but only Walter heard him, and he cautioned his chum quickly.

"Don't let the girls hear you say that," he whispered. "I agree with you that they might be better off on an island, than on the steamer, with the mutineers and smugglers. But if the girls hear that, they'll have all kinds of fits. Keep still about it."

"Oh, I intend to. But this complicates matters, doesn't it? We'll have to find a constantly moving steamer, instead of a stationary island."

"It's about six of one and a half dozen of the other," spoke Walter. "But we have help in our search now," and he nodded toward the cutter, only the smoke of which could now be seen.

St. Kitts was reached without further incident,

and Sailor Ben was taken ashore, Cora insisting on leaving him a sufficient sum of money to insure his care until he could find another berth. Then the pursuit of the *Romona* was again taken up.

For two days the *Tartar* cruised about on her strange quest, and when the third evening came, with the sun setting behind a bank of slate-colored clouds, Cora said to Jack:

"It looks like a storm."

"You're right, Sis," he agreed. And, even as he spoke, there came a strange moaning of the wind, which sprang up suddenly, whipping feathers of foam from the crests of the oily waves.

At the same moment, Joe, who had come up from the motor room for a breath of fresh air, cried out:

"Sail ho!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PURSUIT

"WHAT is it?" cried Cora, as she came up from the little dining cabin, where she and the other girls had been "doing" the dishes.

"A small steamer, Miss," answered the engineer of the *Tartar*. "I can't just make out what she is—sort of misty and hazy just now."

"She seems to be headed this way," spoke Bess, who had joined Cora on the little deck. "Oh, but doesn't the weather look queer?"

She turned a questioning and rather frightened gaze at her chum.

"I think we're in for a storm," Cora spoke. "But we're too good sailors to mind that—aren't we?"

"I—I hope so," faltered Bess.

It was not so much a question of sea-sickness with the motor girls, as it was a fear of damage in a comparatively small craft. They had been on the water enough, and in stressful times, too, so that they suffered no qualms. But a storm at sea is ever a frightful sensation, to even the seasoned traveler.

"Why, that boat is headed right for us," observed Belle, who had also come out of the dining cabin. As for Inez, she frankly did not like the water except when the sky was blue and the sun shining, though she was far from being cowardly about it. So she remained below.

"Jack! Jack!" called Cora, for Walter and her brother had gone down to their staterooms to don "sea togs," as Jack called them—meaning thereby clothes that salt water would not damage.

"What is it, Sis?" he asked.

"There's another boat headed for us. Perhaps she wants help?" Cora suggested.

"We'll give them all we can," Jack called, as he came hurrying up. Then, as he steadied himself at the rail, and looked off through the mist toward the on-coming boat, he uttered an exclamation.

"Why—that's the revenue cutter again!" he cried. "I'm sure of it! How about that, Joe?"

The engineer, who had left his machinery in charge of Slim Jim, for the time, cleared his eyes of the salty spray.

"I guess you're right," he agreed. "I couldn't make her out at first, but that's who she is. Guess she wants to ask us if we have any more information. Shall I heave to?"

"Better, I think," advised Cora, following

Jack's questioning glance. For, be it known, Jack deferred more than usual to his sister on this cruise, since he had been under her direction, rather than she under his.

That it was the desire of the on-coming craft to have the *Tartar* slow up was evident a moment later. For, as the powerful motors revolved with less speed, a hail came over the heaving blue waters, that now had turned to a sickly green under the strange hue of the setting sun.

"On board the *Tartar!*" came the cry. Evidently the boat of our voyagers had not been forgotten.

"Ahoy!" shouted Jack, using a megaphone Cora handed him.

"Stand by!" was the next command. "We want to send"—there came an undistinguishable word—"aboard."

"They're going to send some one aboard!" cried Bess. "Oh, if it should be our folks—mother and father—your mother, Cora dear!"

A flush of excitement gathered on Cora's cheeks. Belle, too, felt that something was impending. Jack and Walter exchanged glances.

The sea was running higher now, under the influence of an ever-increasing wind, and it was no easy matter to lower a small boat from the cutter—a small boat containing three men.

"It's just as it was before—when they came

to us for news!" exclaimed Bess. "I wonder if they bring us news, now."

"They certainly aren't bringing any of our people," said Cora with a sigh, for, though she had discounted the hope that Bess had expressed, yet she could not altogether free herself from it. It was evident that none save sailors were coming toward the *Tartar*.

"And, when the small boat drew nearer, those aboard the gasoline craft saw that they were to receive the same Lieutenant Walling who had before paid them a visit.

"What is it, please?" asked Cora, leaning over the rail. She was unable to withhold her question longer.

"We have—news for you!" exclaimed the lieutenant, the pause coming as he made an ineffectual grasp for the rail as his boat rose on the swell.

"News!" gasped Cora. Her heart was beating wildly now.

"Oh, we haven't rescued your people," Lieutenant Walling hastened to assure her, as this time he managed to grasp the rail of the motor boat, swinging himself over on the deck. The swells were so high that no accommodation ladder was needed. "That's all—you may go back, and say to Captain Decker that I will look after matters," he said to the sailors in the small boat.

One of them fended off from the side of the *Tartar,* while the other pulled on the oars. Soon they were on their way back, crossing the stretch of now sullenly heaving water between the two craft.

"I find myself, under the direction of my commanding officer, Captain Decker, obliged to ask for help," said Lieutenant Walling, with a smile.

"Help?" repeated Jack, who, with Walter, had joined the group of girls about the officer.

"Yes. We have had news that the *Romona* has been seen in this vicinity, and we were after her. But there was an accident to our machinery, and we can't go on in the storm. The cutter was obliged to put back when we sighted you.

"I suggested to Captain Decker that possibly you could give us the very help we needed. You have an object in finding the *Romona,* not the same object as ourselves, but stronger, if anything," and the lieutenant looked at Cora. She nodded her head in assent.

"So it occurred to me," Lieutenant Walling went on, "that I might continue the chase in the *Tartar.* It is doubtful if our cutter could manage to navigate in the storm we seem about to have, so we should have been obliged to put back in any case, even if we had not had the accident. But you can stand a pretty good blow," he said, referring to the *Tartar.*

"She's a good little boat, all right," said Jack, who knew something of motor craft.

"So I perceive. And now, if you will allow me to use it on behalf of the government, we will try to catch the *Romona*."

"Is there really a chance of doing that?" asked Cora, in her eagerness laying her hand on the sleeve of the young officer.

"There really is," was his answer. "She has been sighted by a fishing schooner—we had word from the captain of it. And the *Romona* seems to be crippled. She was going slowly. We ought to catch her soon—if this storm holds off long enough."

"Oh, isn't it exciting, Cora!" whispered Bess. "Almost like the time when you saved the papers in the red oar at Denny Shane's cabin!"

"Only I hope there are no physical encounters," spoke Cora, with a shudder, as she recalled the strenuous days spent on Crystal Bay.

"I fancy you need not be alarmed," the lieutenant said. "From what we can learn, the mutineers and smugglers are rather sick of their bargain. There have been dissentions, and part of the crew is ready to give up. But the others are afraid of the punishment that will be meted out."

"Will it be heavy?" asked Belle.

"Heavy enough," was the significant answer.

"It is a high crime to mutiny on the ocean, especially in time of storm and trouble."

"Then you have a good chance of catching them?" asked Jack.

"We think so—yes."

"But isn't this a rather—er—small force to capture a large steamer, in possession of desperate men?" Walter wanted to know.

"It isn't as risky as you might think," answered Lieutenant Walling, with a smile. "As I said, the smugglers are now divided. One-half is almost ready to turn on the other half. Once they are commanded to surrender, in the name of the government, I fancy they'll be only too glad to."

"And what of the passengers—our folks?" asked Cora.

"Well, they are still aboard, as far as can be learned," was the revenue officer's reply. "If we have luck, you may be with them before another day passes. But we need—luck," and as he said this, he glanced around the horizon, as if to judge how much the elements might figure in the odds against him.

Truly they seemed likely to make the chances anything but easy. The wind was constantly increasing in force, and from a low moan had changed to a threatening whine and growl. The seas were running high and the swells were breaking into foam. As yet the *Tartar* rode

easily, being now under way again, but though she might stand even heavier waves than those now rolling after her, it would not be very comfortable for those aboard.

"Will you take command?" asked Jack, in answer to a look from his sister. "We'll turn this boat over to you, though we're United States' subjects, and you're——"

"British—you needn't be afraid to say it," frankly laughed the lieutenant. "But I fancy we can strike up a friendly alliance. No, I don't wish to take command. This is merely asking you for an accommodation on your part. You are after the *Romona,* as I understand it, and so am I. I merely ask to be allowed to go along and help you find her. Once I get aboard I shall put under arrest all the mutineers. And you will be with your people."

"Oh, if we ever are again!"

"Which way was she headed when you last had information?" asked Walter.

"Southeast," was the reply, "and she isn't far ahead of us now. By crowding on speed we may overtake her by morning."

"Hear that, Joe?" cried Jack. "Do your best now!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" was the reply.

"Have you gasoline for a long run?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes," Jack answered. "We filled the tanks at St. Kitts. But won't you come below, and we'll arrange for your comfort."

"And do let me make you a cup of tea!" begged Cora. "I know you Englishmen are so fond of it——"

"Well, we get rather out of the habit at sea," was the reply, "but I should be glad of some—if it isn't too much trouble."

Through the gathering dusk, the advent of which was hastened by the coming storm, the *Tartar* heaved her way over the tumbling waters. Night came, and still the storm did not break. The lieutenant proved a good seaman, and, under his direction the motor boat kept on through the hours of darkness. The motor girls did not rest much, nor did Walter or Jack.

As morning came, the storm broke in all its fury—being little short, in violence, of a West Indian hurricane. On through the mist, through the smother of foam, over the big greenish-blue waves scudded the *Tartar,* the lieutenant, in oil-skins, standing in the bows, peering ahead for a sight of the steamer.

And, at noon, following a fierce burst of wind, he gave a cry.

"What is it?" asked Jack, struggling toward him.

"Ship ahead! I think it's the *Romona!*" was the answer.

CHAPTER XXVII

SENOR RAMO

CLINGING to the life-lines that had been stretched along the deck, Jack made his way to a partly-sheltered spot near which the lieutenant stood.

"Where is she?" asked Jack, fairly shouting the words into the officer's ear, for the noise of the storm was such as to make this necessary.

"Right ahead!" was the answer. "Look when we go up on the next crest."

One moment the *Tartar* was down in the hollow of the waves, and the next on the top of the swell, and it was only on the latter occasion that a glimpse ahead could be had.

"Now's your chance!" cried Lieutenant Walling to Jack. "Look!"

Eagerly Cora's brother peered through the mist, wiping the salty spray from his eyes. Just ahead, wallowing in the trough of the sea, as though she were only partly under control, was a steamer.

"I see her!" Jack shouted, and then the *Tartar* went down in the hollow between two waves again, and he could glimpse only the seething water as it hissed past under the force of the wind.

"I think it's the *Romona*—I'm not sure," was the lieutenant's next remark.

"What are you going to do about it?" Jack wanted to know.

"Hang on as long as I can," was the grim reply. "She doesn't look as though she were good for much more, and we are."

"Yes, we seem to be making it pretty well," Jack answered.

Indeed the staunch little *Tartar* was more than living up to her name. She was buoyant, and there was a power and thrust to her screw that kept her head on to the heavy seas, which allowed her to ride them.

The chase was now on, and a chase it was, for soon after sighting the steamer ahead of them, Lieutenant Walling, by means of powerful glasses, had made sure that she was the *Romona,* and, without doubt, in charge of the mutineers, unless, indeed, the half of the crew opposed to them had risen, and taken matters into their own hands.

"But we'll soon find out," said the lieutenant, grimly.

"How?" asked Cora, for the officer had come down into the cabin. "Can you board her now?"

"Hardly, in this blow, Miss Kimball. "But we can hang on, and get them as soon as it lets up a little."

"Won't they get away from us?" Bess wanted to know. She, as well as her more fragile sister, had thoroughly entered into the spirit of the chase now.

"I think we can more than hold our own with them," answered the lieutenant. "You have a very fast craft here, and owing to the fact that they haven't much coal, and that they have probably suffered some damage, we won't let them get away very easily. We can hold on, I think."

"Then you won't try to run up alongside now?" Walter wanted to know.

"Indeed not! It would be dangerous. She rolls like a porpoise in a seaway, and she'd crush us like an egg shell if we got too close. All we can do is to hold off a bit, until this blows out. And it can't last very long at this season of the year. Storms never do."

For all the hopeful prediction of the young officer, this blow showed no signs of an early abatement. The wind seemed to increase, rather than diminish, and the seas were still very high.

Through it all the *Tartar* behaved well. Joe, with Slim Jim, the faithful negro, to help, kept the motors up to their work, and Walter, Jack and the lieutenant took turns steering, for it was too much to ask Joe or Jim to do this in addition to their other work.

The afternoon was waning, and it was evident that there would be another early night, for the clouds were thick. Walter and Jack had gone up on deck, while the lieutenant remained in the cabin, taking some hot tea which Cora had prepared for him. A warm feeling of friendship had sprung up between the young officer and our travelers. Inez was not feeling well, and had gone to lie down in her berth, though it was anything but comfortable there, since the boat rolled and pitched so.

"I say!" called Jack, down a partly opened port into the cabin, "I think you'd better come up here, Lieutenant."

"Oh, he hasn't had his tea yet!" objected Cora.

"That doesn't matter—if something is up!" was the hasty rejoinder, and, leaving the table, the revenue officer hastened up on deck, buttoning his oilskins as he went. "What is it?" he asked of the two young men.

"She seems to be turning," said Jack. "I thought you'd better know."

"That's right. I'm glad you called me. Yes, she is changing her course," said Lieutenant Walling. "I wonder what she's up to?"

The *Romona*—Jack and Walter had made out her name under her stern rail now—was still slowly wallowing in the sea. She appeared to have lost headway, for she was moving very slowly, having barely steerage-way on. The *Tartar* had no trouble in keeping up to her.

"I wonder if they've seen us, and are waiting for us?" ventured Walter.

"They may have seen us, but they wouldn't stop—not in this sea," was the reply of the revenue officer. "They're up to some trick, and I can't just fathom what it is."

With keen eyes he watched the steamer as it tore on through the mist. It was much nearer now.

"I have an idea!" suddenly exclaimed the British officer. "I'll be back in a moment."

He hurried down to the cabin again, and through a port Jack and Walter saw him bending over some charts. In a few minutes the lieutenant was up on deck again.

"I understand!" he cried. "I know what they're up to now."

"What?" asked Jack. He did not have to shout so loudly now, as the storm seemed to be lessening in its fury.

"They're going to run in under the lea of Palm Island," said Lieutenant Walling. "I guess they've had enough of it. This is the beginning of the end. They must be in bad shape."

"Sinking—do you mean?" asked Walter.

"No, not exactly. But they may have run out of coal, and can't keep the engines going any longer. Yes, that's what they're doing—making for Palm Island."

"What sort of a place is that?" Jack wanted to know.

"A mighty ticklish sort of place to run for during a storm," was the answer. "There's a bad coral reef at the entrance to the harbor, but once you pass that you're all right. I wonder if they can navigate it?"

"And if they don't?" asked Jack.

"Well, they'll pile her up on the reef, and she'll pound to pieces in no time in this sea."

Walter and Jack followed the lieutenant to the after deck, where the wheel was. There the revenue officer relieved Joe, the latter going to his motor, which needed attention. The storm was constantly growing less in violence.

As yet there was no sign of an island, but presently, through the gathering darkness, there loomed up a black mass in the swirl of white waters.

Now came the hard and risky work of getting in through the opening of a dangerous coral reef

to the sheltered harbor. The big steamer went first, and, for a time, it seemed that she was doomed, for the current played with her like a toy ship. But whoever was in charge of the wheel had a master's hand, and soon the craft had shot into the calm waters, followed by the *Tartar*.

It was a great relief from the pitching and tossing of the last two days.

"Oh, to be quiet again!"

"Isn't it delightful!" agreed Bess. "And now if we can only find our folks——"

Lieutenant Walling lost no time. As the *Romona* dropped her anchor, he sent the *Tartar* alongside, and on his official hail a ladder was lowered. Walter and Jack mounted with him.

"Every mutinous member of this crew is under arrest!" was the grim announcement of the revenue officer. "Who's in charge? Are there any passengers aboard?"

Anxiously Jack looked for a sign of his mother, or for Mr. and Mrs. Robinson. He saw nothing of them.

"The passengers were all put ashore, sir," said a sailor, with a salute.

"Where?" demanded the lieutenant.

Before he could answer there came on deck a fat man, at the sight of whom Jack uttered an exclamation.

"Senor Ramo!" cried Cora's brother.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOUND

UNAWARE of what was taking place on the deck of the *Romona,* for they were far below its level in the *Tartar,* Cora, Belle, Bess and Inez looked anxiously aloft. They could hear a murmur of voices, but little else. It was nearly dark now, but Joe switched on the electrics in the motor boat, and aboard the steamer lights began to gleam.

"Well!" exclaimed Cora, with her usual spirit. "I'm not going to stay here and miss everything. I want to see mother just as much as Jack does."

She was as yet unaware, you see, of what the sailor had said to her brother.

"Where are you going?" asked Bess, as Cora started for the dangling accommodation ladder.

"Up there!" was the quick answer.

"Oh, Cora! Don't leave us!" begged Bess.

"Come along then," suggested Jack's practical sister.

"But it—it's so—steep!" complained Bess, who was more "plump" than ever, due to the inactivity of the sea trip.

"It won't be any less steep from waiting," spoke Cora, grimly, "and it'll soon be so dark that you'll likely fall off, if you try to go up. I'm going—mother must be up there, and so must your folks."

"Of course!" cried Belle. "Don't be a coward, Bess."

"I'm not, but——"

"I will help," said Inez, gently, as she glided up from the cabin. "Perhaps zere may be news of my father!"

She had been very patient all this while regarding news of her parent—very unselfish, for though the trip was partly undertaken to aid Senor Ralcanto, if possible, nothing as yet had been done toward this. All efforts had been bent toward getting news of Mrs. Kimball, and Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, and Inez had said nothing. Even now she was willing to help others first.

"You're a dear," murmured Cora, her foot on the first step of the mounting ladder. "Oh, to think that all our worry is over now!" She had yet to learn what was in store for her and the others.

"Oh, I know I'll fall!" cried Bess, as she essayed to go up.

"Don't be silly!" cautioned Cora. "Belle, you pull her from in front, and, Inez, you push. We've just got to get her up."

The *Tartar* had been made fast by a rope tossed from the deck of the *Romona,* and Joe and Slim Jim stood on deck, ready to execute any commands that might come from the young navigators. Cora and the other girls safely reached the deck of the steamer.

A curious sight confronted them.

Jack and Walter stood confronting, in the glare of several electric lights, the portly form of Senor Ramo, who seemed ill at ease. The members of the mutinous crew stood about, rather shame-facedly, it must be confessed. Lieutenant Walling wore an air of triumph. He had brought the criminals to the end of their rope.

"Jack! Where are they?" asked Cora, impulsively.

"They—they're not here," her brother answered.

"Not here? Then where are they? Oh, don't say they're——"

Cora's voice could not frame the words.

At this moment Inez caught sight of Senor Ramo. She was rather a timid girl, and her troubles and tribulations had not made her any bolder, but now, at the sight of the man she believed had done, or who contemplated doing her father an injury, the Spanish maid's courage flashed to the fore.

Inez sprang forward and began to speak rap-

idly in Spanish. Cora, who had managed to pick up a few words, understood that Inez was making a spirited demand for the papers which she accused the fat man of having taken from her room. Over and over again she insisted on receiving them—here, now, at once, without delay!

So insistent was she that it looked as though she meant to make a personal assault on Senor Ramo, and take the papers from his ill-fitting frock coat.

"Whew!" whistled Walter, "that's going some, isn't it?"

"Walter! How can you?" remonstrated Cora. "At such a time, too!"

"Just can't help it!" he murmured. "He's getting his deserts all right."

Senor Ramo fairly backed away from the excited Inez, but she followed him to the very rail, where, as he could go no further, he made a stand, and continued to listen to her voluble talk.

"She certainly has some spirit," murmured Lieutenant Walling to Cora. "Is that the fellow she suspects?" he asked, for he had been told the story of Inez.

"Yes," answered Cora. "But is my mother aboard? And Mr. and Mrs. Robinson?"

"They're not!" broke in Jack. "These scoundrels have put them ashore—somewhere!"

"Oh!" cried Bess and Belle in chorus.

"Where?" demanded practical Cora.

"I am going to institute an inquiry at once," said Lieutenant Walling. "I'll also have something to say to that fat Spaniard. Better tell your friend so," he suggested to the motor girls. "She might cause him to act hastily. He might do something desperate."

"She only wants some papers she thinks he has," said Jack, "and I guess she's going to get them," for Senor Ramo was putting his hand to his inside breast pocket.

"I'll soon straighten out this tangle," the lieutenant promised. "I'll have the ring-leaders locked up, and then we'll get at the bottom of the whole affair. I'd better send ashore for help, though. May I use your boat?"

"Certainly," answered Cora. She was keenly disappointed at not finding the lost ones aboard. She and the others had counted so much on this when they should have come up to the *Romona.* Where could the passengers be?

Jim and Joe were sent, in the *Tartar,* to bring aboard representatives of the English government, Palm Island belonging to Great Britian. The mutinous crew had no spirit of resistance left. The erstwhile commander of the rebelling forces was locked in his stateroom, until Lieutenant Walling was reinforced, when others of the leaders were put in irons.

"And now I hope we can get some news," spoke Cora, when some sort of order had been brought out of the confusion, and the ship had been formally taken in charge by the authorities.

"You shall have all there is," promised Lieutenant Walling. "First, in regard to your parents," and he looked from Cora to the twins. "They are safe, so far as can be judged, though they may be in some distress."

"But where are they?" asked Cora, for Jack had found a chance to tell her that he had been informed they were put ashore."

"On Double Island," answered Lieutenant Walling. "They were made prisoners when the mutineers rose, and seized the ship. They were locked in their cabins, so some of those who have confessed told me, and when the storm was over, they were treated fairly well. They were forced to remain on board while the plan of entering into the smuggling game was carried on. They tried to get ashore, or to send messages for help, but were frustrated.

"Then, finally, some of the crew began to grumble at the presence of the passengers. Food was running low, and a certain amount of care was required to prevent them from escaping. The upshot of it was that your parents were put ashore on Double Island, with a fairly good amount of food and other supplies."

"How long ago?"

"Where is Double Island?"

"Can't we start and rescue them?"

"What of Inez's father?"

These questions were fairly rained on Lieutenant Walling.

"One at a time, please," he said, as he gazed at the young people gathered about him in the cabin of the *Romona.*

"It was over a week ago that the passengers were put ashore—on Double Island—there were only your parents," he added, glancing again from Cora to the twins. "All the others had departed in the small boats when it was feared that the *Romona* was sinking. As to the location of Double Island—it is about two days' steaming from here. We certainly can, and will, rescue them, and as for the father of Miss Inez—well, that is another matter. We shall have to see Senor Ramo. He seems to know something about the prisoner—at least Miss Inez thinks that he does."

At that moment Inez came into the cabin. Whether she had been all this while "laying down the law," as Jack phrased it, to the fat Spaniard was not, for the present, disclosed. But she was greatly excited, and she flourished in her hand a package of documents.

"I have ze papairs!" she cried, exultantly.

"Now my father will be free. Oh, Senorita—you will help me—will you not—to go to Sea Horse Island and rescue him?"

"Of course," spoke Cora, in answer to this pleading. "My! but we have lots of work ahead of us!" and she sighed.

"But you are equal to it, my dear," said Bess. "Oh, to see papa and mamma again!"

"And to think of them living on some lonely little island!" sighed her sister. "We can't go to them quickly enough!"

"You had better go ashore for the night," suggested Lieutenant Walling, "and we'll start early in the morning. I'll go with you—if you'll let me," and he looked at Jack's sister.

"Of course," murmured Cora, blushing slightly.

"You'll need more gasoline perhaps, and other stores," the officer went on. "And the journey will be much easier made with a good morning's start."

So it was decided. Supper was served for the young people aboard the *Romona,* by direction of the British officer who was put in charge. There was rather more room to move about than on the *Tartar.* After the meal—the merriest since the strange quest had begun—explanations were forthcoming.

"I want to know how Inez got those papers

away from Ramo," said Walter, with a flash of admiration at the Spanish girl.

"Ah, Senor, it is no secret," she laughed. "I said I knew he had zem, and if he did not gif zem to me, I would tear zem from his pocket! He gave zem to me," she finished, simply.

"Good for you!" cried Jack. "What became of him?"

"I believe he went ashore in a small boat," said the lieutenant. "I'm having him watched, though, for I think he had some hand in this smuggling. In fact, he may prove to be at the bottom of the whole business."

And so it turned out. Senor Ramo, while pretending to be a respectable Spanish coffee merchant, had been engaged secretly in smuggling. It was he who planned the mutiny on the *Romona,* for purposes of his own, though the storm gave him unexpected aid. He had joined the steamer later, after having stolen the papers from the room of Inez.

For it was Ramo who had taken them. His agents had sent him word that Inez had the means to free the political prisoner, and as this would have interfered with the plans of Ramo and his cronies, he determined to frustrate it. So, watching his chance, he took the papers and fled to join his mutinous and smuggling comrades. But the fates were against him. Later, it was learned

that Ramo had tried, through agents in New York, to get the papers from the Spanish girl. And the tramp in Chelton was, undoubtedly, one of them.

Inez said Ramo explained to her that he intended to keep her father a prisoner only a short time longer. With Senor Ralcanto free, the plans of the smugglers would have been interfered with, for the father of Inez, and his party, stood for law and order.

"But now I free my father myself!" cried the Spanish girl, proudly. "No more do I wait for that—fat one!"

So with the papers which would eventually release the Spanish prisoner, and well fitted out for the cruise to Double Island, the *Tartar* once again set forth on her cruise.

"There the island is!" cried Lieutenant Walling, on the second day out. "And I think I can see a flag flying. Few ships pass this way, but, very likely, the refugees would try to call one.

And, a little later, as the *Tartar* came nearer, Cora, who was looking through the glasses, cried out:

"I can see them! They are on shore! There's mother, Jack! She's waving, though of course she doesn't know who we are. And I see your mother and father, girls! Oh, Bess—Belle—we've found them!"

CHAPTER XXIX

AT SEA HORSE

THERE proved to be a good harbor at Double Island—a harbor ringed about with sand-fringed coral, with a sandy bottom which could be seen through the limpid depths of the blue water that was as clear as a sapphire-tinted crystal. And, a short way up from the beach was a line of palms, and other tropical plants, while, in a little clearing near what proved to be a trickling spring, was a rude sort of hut.

"Ahoy, folks!" yelled Jack, his voice ringing out with its old vigor. "Here we are!"

What the three on the beach said could not be heard, but they were plainly much excited.

"They don't yet know who we are," said Cora.

"They only know they are being rescued," echoed Bess.

"Oh, but isn't it great—we've found them!" cried Belle, in delight, hugging first Cora, then Bess and next Inez.

Inez said nothing, but her shining eyes told of the joy she felt in the happiness of her friends. Her time for rejoicing was yet to come.

So little did the beach in the coral harbor shelve that the big motor boat could come up to within a few yards of the shore.

"Why, it's Jack—and Cora!" cried Mrs. Robinson. "It's your son and daughter—and—my girls! Oh, of all things!"

Mrs. Kimball could not answer. She was softly crying on the shoulder of Mrs. Robinson, Mr. Robinson, who had been trying to catch some crabs along shore, had his trousers rolled up. He was rather a disheveled figure as he stood there—in fact, none of the refugees appeared to sartorial advantage—but who minded that?

"Hurray!" yelled Mr. Robinson, waving a piece of cloth on a stick—an improvised crab-net. "Hurray! So you've come for the Robinson Crusoes; have you?"

"That's it!" shouted Jack, who was getting the small boat ready to go ashore.

"I thought we'd find them," spoke Lieutenant Walling.

"Oh, and we can't thank you enough!" Cora murmured to him gratefully. "Only for you we might not have located the *Romona* in a long time, and we might have been a month finding the folks. And you dear good girl!" she went on,

putting her arms about Inez. "Next we are going to rescue your father."

"I shall be glad—mos' glad!" said the Spanish girl, softly.

Then they all went ashore, and brother and sisters were clasped in the arms of their loved ones.

"But how did it all happen?" asked Mr. Robinson. "How did you know where to look for us? Did the *Romona's* crew repent, and send you for us? Tell us all about it! How are you, anyhow?"

He poured out a veritable flood of questions, which the girls, Jack, Walter and Lieutenant Walling tried to answer as best they could—the girls, it must be confessed, rather hysterically and tearfully.

"It was Cora and Jack who had the idea," said Bess, when quiet had been a little restored. "They determined to charter a motor boat and go in search of you, after we heard that the *Romona* had foundered in the storm. And of course we wouldn't be left behind."

"Brave girls," murmured their mother.

"Indeed they were brave," declared Jack, patting Bess on her plump shoulder.

"We—we were afraid of being left behind," confessed Belle. "So we came."

"But what have you done since being ma-

rooned here?" Cora wanted to know. "Wasn't it awful—just awful?"

"Not so—awful!" answered Mr. Robinson, with a laugh that could be jolly now. "We've had a fine time, and you should see some of the orchids I have gathered! It was worth all the hardship!"

"But, really, it hasn't been so bad," said Mrs. Kimball. "The weather was delightful, except for the two storms, and we have had enough to eat—such as it was. We have been camping out, and no more ideal place for such a life can be found than a West Indian coral island in December."

She looked back amid the palms, among which grew in a tropical luxuriousness many beautiful blossoms, with birds of brilliant plumage flitting from flower to flower.

"And you look so well," commented Cora, for indeed, aside from traces of sunburn, the refugees were "pictures of health."

"We are well," declared Mrs. Robinson. "But of course we have been terribly worried about you girls, and Jack, too. How are you, Jack?" she asked, anxiously.

"You needn't ask," laughed Cora. "One glance is enough."

"Oh, I had a little touch of my old trouble," said Jack, in answer to his mother's questioning

glance, "but I'm fine and fit now. But tell us about yourselves."

"Well, we're camping out here," said Mr. Robinson, with a laugh, "waiting for some vessel to come along and take us off. We could have stood it for another month, though it was getting pretty lonesome, with all due respect to the ladies," and he made a mock bow.

"That's nothing to how tiresome just *one* man can get, my dears!" put in his wife, to the girls.

Then they exchanged stories of their adventures. As those of the motor girls are well known to our readers, there is no need to dwell further on them.

As the crew of the *Romona* had confessed, they had set the passengers—Mrs. Kimball and Mr. and Mrs. Robinson—ashore on Double Island, some time after the uprising. Our friends were glad enough to leave the vessel, for there were constant bickerings and quarrels among the mutineers. Affairs did not go at all smoothly.

So it was with comparatively small regret that the refugees found themselves set ashore. They were given a boat, and a sufficient supply of food and stores. Only in the matter of clothing were they handicapped, having only a few belongings, the mutineers keeping the remainder.

"When we got ashore, and took an account of stock," said Mr. Robinson, "I found some sort

of shelter would be necessary, even if we were in a land of almost perpetual June.

"This wasn't the first time I had gone camping, under worse circumstances than these, so I soon put up this hut. Not bad, is it?" and he waved his hand toward the palm-leaf thatched structure.

"It's great!" cried Jack. "I think I'll stay here a while myself, and camp out."

"You may—I've had enough," said Mrs. Robinson. "Oh, I do hope you girls have some spare hairpins!" she exclaimed. "Perry said to use thorns, but even if Mother Eve did her hair up that way, I can't!" she sighed.

"Well, to make a long story short," resumed Mr. Robinson, "we've been here ever since. And we are beginning to enjoy ourselves. We've had enough to eat, such as it is, though the tinned stuff gets a trifle palling after a time. So I've been trying to catch a few crabs."

"And he hasn't had any luck—he might as well confess," said his wife.

"Give me time, my dear," protested Mr. Robinson. "There's one now!"

He made a swoop with the improvised net, but the crustacean flipped itself into deep water and escaped.

"Never mind—you're going to leave now, Dad!" said Bess, gaily.

The young folks inspected the rude hut, and were charmed by its simplicity.

"Though it does leak," said Mr. Robinson. "I must admit that."

"Leak!" cried Mrs. Robinson. "It's a regular sieve!"

"Might as well haul down our signal," observed Mr. Robinson, for on a tall palm, at a prominent height of the island, he had raised an improvised flag.

Double Island was uninhabited, and was seldom visited by any vessels, though in the course of time the refugees would have been rescued, even if the motor girls had not come for them. But their experience would have been unpleasant, if not dangerous.

"Well, let's go aboard and start back to civilization," proposed Belle, after Lieutenant Walling had been introduced, and his part in the affair told.

"But we mustn't forget Inez's father!" cried Cora. "We still have some rescue work to do."

"Oh, I'm so sorry I couldn't make any move along that line," spoke Mr. Robinson. "But now I'll attend to it, Inez."

"We'll make for Sea Horse Island at once," said Cora. "Inez has the papers with her. Tell him how you threatened Senor Ramo, dear." and the tale of the fat Spaniard was related.

Made comfortable aboard the *Tartar,* which had resumed her strange cruise, the refugees told little details of their marooning, which story there had not been time for on the island.

The days were pleasant, the weather all that could be desired, and in due season Sea Horse was sighted. This was a small place, maintained by the Spanish government as a prison for political offenders. As the *Tartar* approached the fort at the harbor entrance, Lieutenant Walling looked through the glass at several flags flying from a high pole.

"Something wrong here," he announced.

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

"Some prisoner, or prisoners, have escaped," was the answer. "The signal indicates that. We'll soon find out."

A curious idea came into Jack's head.

CHAPTER XXX

SENOR RALCANTO

Sea Horse Island was not attractive. There was no coral enclosed harbor, filled with limpid blue water—though the sea off shore was blue enough, for that matter. There were a few waving palms, and a hill or two midland. But that was all. The principal building was the political prison, and the barracks, or quarters of the commanding officer and his aides. In fact, Sea Horse Island was as little beautiful as its name. But the eyes of Inez glowed when she saw it, for once it had been home to her.

"And now to see my father!" cried the Spanish girl, when preparations were made for going ashore. "Zey can hardly keep me from seeing him, can zey?" she asked Mr. Robinson and Lieutenant Walling.

"I think not, my dear," said the former. "And if I am any judge of the worth of evidence, they can't refuse to let him go, after we show our documents, though it may take a little time."

"Matters may not be all easy sailing now," suggested the British officer.

"Why not?" demanded Cora.

"Because of the fact that there has been an escape—perhaps several," was the answer. "Those signal flags are a warning to all vessels not to take aboard any refugees that seem to have escaped from here, unless they are taken as prisoners."

"How horrid!" murmured Bess.

"But we'll go see the commandant, and learn how matters stand," went on Mr. Robinson. "Fortunately I have letters from persons in influence that may aid me. And you have your papers, Inez?"

"Yes, Senor. I have them," she answered.

Our friends were stared at rather disconcertingly as they landed, and there was no little suspicion in the glances directed at them, as they made their way to the commandant's quarters.

There was some delay before they were admitted, for they all went in together, all save Walter, and he had said it might be best if he remained on board the *Tartar* with Joe and Jim.

"We have come," said Mr. Robinson to the Spanish officer, "to arrange for the release of Senor Ralcanto—the father of this young lady. We have papers which prove his innocence of the charge against him, and I may add that one of

the men responsible for his unjust arrest is himself a prisoner, and on a more serious charge than a mere political one. I refer to Senor Ramo, who is in jail at Palm Island."

The commandant started. Evidently he was regarding his callers with more courtesy, for he had been a bit supercilious at first.

"Senor Ramo incarcerated?" he asked. "Is it possible?"

"Very much so," went on Mr. Robinson, grimly. "And now we come to demand the release of Senor Ralcanto—or at least I demand to have an interview with him—as does his daughter—that we may take measures for freeing him. If you will look at the copies of these papers, you will see what authority we have," and he tossed some letters, and copies of the documents Inez had recovered, on the table.

"I am sorry, but it is impossible to grant what you request," said the commandant stiffly, hardly glancing at the papers.

"Why?" asked Mr. Robinson, truculently. "Do you mean we cannot see the prisoner, or that you will not release him?"

"Both!" was the surprising answer. "You cannot see Senor Ralcanto because he is not here. And I cannot release him, had I the power, for he has released himself. In other words, Senor, he has—escaped!"

"I HAVE FOUND YOU AT LAST! PADRE."

"Escaped!" cried Jack and Cora in a breath.

"My father escaped!" murmured Inez. "Oh, praise ze dear God for zat! He is free! Oh, but where is he?"

"That I know not, Senorita," was the stiff answer. "I wish I did. We have searched for him, but have not found him. He must have had friends working for him on the outside," and he glanced with suspicious eyes at our friends.

"Well, we probably would have worked for him, had we had the chance," said Mr. Robinson, "but we had no hand in his escape. May I ask how he got away from your prison?"

"In a boat—about a week ago," was the grudging reply. "That is all I can say. He is no longer on Sea Horse Island. I have the honor to bid you good-day!"

"Polite, at any rate," murmured Jack. "Bow, what's our next move?"

"To find her father!" exclaimed the British officer, promptly. He had entered into this as enthusiastically as he had into the task of finding the mutineers and smugglers.

"If he got away in a boat," resumed the lieutenant, "he would most likely make for some island. There are many such not far from here, but these Spaniards are so back-numbered, they wouldn't think of making a systematic search. That's for us to do."

"Oh, if we can only find him!" murmured Inez.

"We will—never fear!" cried Jack, with as much enthusiasm as he could muster at short notice.

It was little use to linger longer on Sea Horse Island. No more information concerning the escaped man was available. It must be a "blind search" from then on. Still, the searchers did not give up hope, and once more the *Tartar* was under way.

I shall not weary you with the details of the final part of her cruise. Suffice it to say that many islands were called at, and many vessels spoken, with a view to finding out if any of the uninhabited coral specks in that stretch of blue West Indian waters had, of late, showed signs of being inhabited by a lone man. But no helpful clue was obtained.

Still the search was kept up. Mr. Robinson, his wife and Mrs. Kimball stayed with the young people, having renewed their wardrobes at the first suitable stopping place. Then the search was resumed.

And, curiously enough, it was Inez who discovered the torn rag, floating from a tree, which gave the signal that help was needed at a lonely isle they reached about two weeks after the search began.

"I think some one is zere," she said to Jack, pointing to the signal.

"It does look so," he agreed. "We'll put in there."

"A hard place to live," said Lieutenant Walling, as he came on deck and viewed the little island. "It is very barren."

"Do you—do you think it can be—my father?" faltered Inez.

"It is possible—it is some poor soul, at all events—or some one *has* been there," the officer concluded.

"You mean—it may be—too late?" asked Cora, softly.

Lieutenant Walling nodded his head in confirmation.

The *Tartar* anchored off shore, and the small boat went to the beach. Hardly had it grounded on the shingle than a tattered and ragged—a tottering figure crawled from the bushes. It was the figure of a man, much emaciated from hunger. But the eyes showed bright from under the matted hair and from out of the straggly beard. Inez, who had come ashore with the first boat-load, sprang forward.

"Padre! Padre!" she cried, opening wide her *Padre!"*
arms, "I have found you at last! *Padre!*

The others drew a little aside.

Once more the *Tartar* was under way. She was nearing the end of her strange cruise, for she was headed for San Juan—the blue harbor of San Juan. Seated on deck, in an easy chair, was a Spanish gentleman, about whom Inez fluttered in a joy of service. It was her father.

He had, after many failures, made his escape from Sea Horse Island in a small boat, and had lived for some time on the little coral rock—hardly worthy the name islet. He had almost starved, but he was free. Then his privations became too much for him, and he hoisted his signal for help. He would even have welcomed a Spanish party, so distressed was he.

But his own daughter—and friends—came instead. And, had he but waited a few weeks, he need not have so suffered in running away from his prison. The papers Inez had secured would have brought about his freedom from the unjust charge.

"But we have him, anyhow!" cried Jack, "and a good job it was, too!"

"Isn't Jack just splendid!" murmured Bess to Cora. "He is *so* well again!"

"Yes, the trip, in spite of its hardships, has worked wonders for him."

"And I suppose we'll have to go back North again, soon," remarked Belle. "Papa's business here is practically finished."

"Yes, we are going back—to—civilization, without smugglers and mutineers," said Mrs. Kimball.

"Oh, I rather liked them—they were sort of a tonic," laughed Mrs. Robinson.

"Sometimes one can take a little too much tonic," spoke Cora. "But it certainly has been a wonderful experience."

The *Tartar* dropped anchor at San Juan, coming to rest in the waters blue, over which she had skimmed on so many adventuresome trips of late.

"Well, are you glad to be back here?" asked Jack, of Senor Ralcanto.

"Indeed, yes, I am. And you have all been so kind to me. I can never repay you for what you have done for my daughter and myself," and he stroked the dark hair of Inez, who knelt at his side.

"Well, send for us again if you—er—need our services," suggested Walter.

"Thank you—but I am going to keep out of prison after this," was the laughing answer.

There is little more to tell of this story. Senor Ralcanto was speedily recovering from his harsh experiences, when our friends took a steamer for New York, some weeks later. The mutineers and smugglers of the *Romona,* including Senor Ramo, the real, influential leader, were duly punished.

After a final cruise about the blue waters of San Juan, in the *Tartar*, our friends bade farewell to the craft that had served them so efficiently.

"Good-bye!" called Cora, as she stood on the steamer-deck, homeward bound, and waved her hand to the blue sky, the blue waters, the blue mountains and the green, waving palms. "Good-bye! Good-bye!"

And we will echo her words.

THE END

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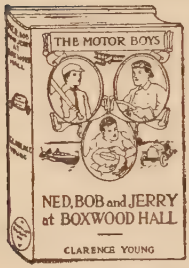

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